

2015

The Cyborg Griffin: a Speculative Fiction Literary Journal

Hollins University

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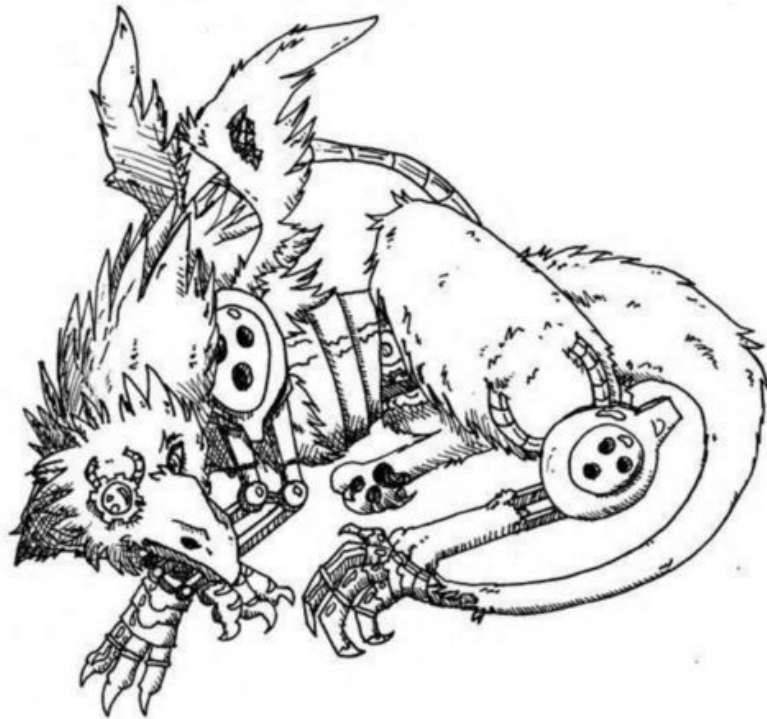


Volume V

2015

The Cyborg Griffin

A Speculative Fiction Literary Journal



Hollins University 2015

Tributes

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Handicap Parking Only

Katie Johnson

The able-bodied abandoned us as almost soon as the virus hit. All of them fleeing into the countryside and small towns just like every movie, TV show, and book had told them to do. We were considered weak and slow. Dead weight. The neurotypical turned on us. Autism was suddenly evidence of Strand Z. The Nonverbal were quickly clumped with the nonliving.

They expected us to die out in the first week. My uncle told me as much before leaving me across the house from my chair and taking my service dog with him. Goddamn fucking walnut he was.

No one expected us to ban together and make the Sanctuaries.

No one expected the deaf college kid in a wheelchair to be such a good shot with a bow. Or the girl that always rocked to make the biggest breakthrough to a cure.

“Hey, they’re going to give you the first round of shots today. Try not to bite anyone.” I said, moving my hands slower just in case there was the possibility Isabel still understood. We weren't exactly sure when understanding was cut off by the virus. She didn't move; not that she moved much these days at all. Mostly she slumped against the side of her cage, blinking slowly, not even caring that her beard was growing back in, or that her hair was tangled, or that her dog Gumbo never left her spot in front of her cage.

But Isabel stayed calm.

Most of the Strand Z victims did actually, as long as they were left in the shade and in the quiet. Food and water kept to schedule. Nothing surprising to be upset about. Sarge suspected that it was overstimulation that drove the infected into rages or frenzies. Something in Strand Z made the victims incredibly sensitive to any stimulation, and the attacks were meltdowns the virus constructed so that it could spread. That was what was going to make getting Isabel out so difficult. She only had her legs left, caught the bad side of an explosion on her last tour with the marines, but I had seen her kick a column in half when she still did patrols around the Sanctuary.

It had mostly just been Gumbo and I at her holding cage; Sarge was always busy on patrols now. I wasn't sure how Isabel would react to a whole team of people or being strapped down to a table. Probably about as well as she took the comment that my uncle made about how together we made a 'whole person', or how much my family laughed at it.

I hoped they got infected on their first day out.

I sighed and scrubbed at my scalp. I half wished I had left on patrols with Sarge this morning, at least then I'd have something to *do* instead of all this waiting. "I'll be back before they come to get you. I'm going to go check on the farm for a bit."

Isabel blinked slowly at me.

I forced a smile. Destiny had been so incredibly thorough in the testing. The vaccine would work on Isabel. She would come back. "I love you, and Sarge does too. We'll both be there when you wake up from this. Promise."

Isabel didn't respond and after a second I wheeled away to the farm. There had better be weeds.

Sarge and Isabel had been the first ones to find me after my family left. My chair was in the basement and I had been locked upstairs in the master bathroom. Isabel had kicked down the door, and sat with me as Sarge searched the house for looters. I had still been too shaken by being abandoned to be of much help.

There hadn't been any looters, but there was also nothing in the pantry or fridge. Everything that hadn't been bolted down had been taken with them.

Thank God I had a locked trunk too heavy for them to lift. Most of it was useless at the moment: thick winter clothes, girl scout swaps, boxes of origami animals and paper. Nestled in all of that had been my bow and full quiver, even a few hunting knives left to me by my parents.

Sarge was the one that had the idea to look for others like us.

We found them dead. More than any of us were prepared for. Killed by caretakers and family if the notes were anything to go by. *It was done in mercy. It was done in love. They wouldn't survive anyway. I had to get out.*

Sick bastards.

We found the abandoned. Children crying in meltdowns because mom wouldn't come inside and get them their apple juice. Schizophrenic teens huddling terrified in the corners of their closets clutching their pill containers to their chests. Elderly crying silently over pictures of their grandkids. An OCD woman burning her hands under the water faucet as she scrubbed them raw to avoid getting the virus. A mute boy with wide eyes and begging hands. The armless, the paralyzed, the legless locked in rooms, mugged, separated from their mobility.

We found the runaways.

Wheeled behind dumpsters. Huddled under sinks. Hiding in elementary school classrooms. Ducked under pews.

We couldn't leave them behind, but no group that big *and* untrained could survive roaming. I asked around, wheeling between the clusters of shaken, and few families that had stayed together, trying to see what skills we had. Chemists, gardeners, Etsy shop owners, pharmacists, programmers, firefighters, hunters, writers, radio personalities, dog trainers, cooks...more than I had ever thought possible. Isabel had been a mechanic and had become an inventor. Sarge had been a firefighter until '*that house*' happened and she lost vision in her left eye, her fine motor skills in her left hand, and gifted her the need for a cane. She was still a bloody brilliant leader.

I was good at crafting, and hell that had to be useful somewhere.

We made the first Sanctuary.

The dirt felt good under my fingers. It was distracting enough. I didn't have to think of Isabel slumped against the bamboo bars of the cage, or when Sarge had carried her back from patrols screaming for a medic.

Fucking Strand Z Host apparently had a string of bells tangled around its waist. Too much noise made it pissed. Isabel had hockey pants and boots with spurs to protect her legs.

The Host had got her on the neck.

Almost broke open her artery, not that it needed to. Strand Z traveled through body fluids and that Host had been foaming mad. By the next night Isabel had be delirious with fever. When she stopped responding, she was moved to the cage. When she stopped responding, Sarge disappeared into patrols.

But it would be fine. Dirt made plants and plants made medicine. Medicine would bring Isabel back and Isabel talking would bring Sarge out of guilt induced triple shifts. And then the bed would stop feeling so empty. I would even let Isabel be the littlest of little spoons.

Destiny had tested it. It was going to work. It worked in blood samples in petri dishes, and lab rats, it was going to work in Isabel.

“Is he back there? Coat, big coat man,” the boy to my right whispered, distinctly not looking behind him. “He was in my closet this morning, is he back there?”

I turned around. “Uhhh, the only one back there is the fire chief watering the tomatoes.”

The boy shuddered and stared firmly at the dirt.

“Do you want me to walk you to your next block?” I offered gently. It had been a good idea, the work blocks. Gave everyone a schedule. People liked schedule when the world was going to hell around them. I looked over to my right. There was another teen, picking boredly at the weeds in the dirt. “Don’t enjoy pulling weeds?”

The teen shrugged.

“What do you like?”

Shrug.

“Is the shipment running late?” I ventured. The medics were vocal against skipping doses to prolong pill inventories but every time a helicopter from another Sanctuary ran late a lot of symptoms flared up. We’d probably need to run suicide watches again till the shipment of medication comes in.

“We should go to our support group,” the teen on the right mumbled. They didn’t sound enthusiastic... they didn’t sound much of anything at all.

“I’ll walk you.” I said, wheeling back from the raised bed and towards the ramp up and out of the greenhouse. I just had to keep busy until it was time to get Isabel to the table.

There were a few rules that got thrown up real fast to keep the peace. Don’t just push a wheelie. Never call anyone a ‘crip’. Medication theft landed you in a cell at half rations. *Never ever* tell someone to ‘just try harder’. Racism wasn’t cool before the apocalypse, and it wasn’t cool during it. The hardest for some to keep were those that referred to jokes. Jokes about suicide, diets, ‘I’m just so OCD’, ‘ADOh pretty’, ‘don’t go all schizo on me’. Just because we had all been beaten down didn’t mean we were good with each other.

Even Sarge nearly kicked someone’s head in after a bad day and they just had to make *that* one comment. “Because I would love to just have fucking dyslexic *moments!*” Sarge had screamed, “Tell me how do you get it down to *motherfucking moments?*”

A lot of the early town meetings were mandatory sensitivity training.

It wasn’t perfect, but desperation was a good motivator to get along.

I nearly popped a wheelie I spun around so fast. Sarge was jogging towards the park where we held the cages. Or at least her version of jogging. I could learn how to knit scarves for the winter later. Sarge was actually going to see Isabel. God, Sarge was back! Maybe Sarge was even staying the night and the bed wouldn’t feel so big and I could actually hear someone else breathe next to me again.

Isabel had moved and was laying in a loose curl on the floor. Sarge was breathing heavy, a hand on her good knee and white-knuckled grip on her cane.

I stopped a few feet from them. “Hey?”

Sarge looked up at me. God I would have thought she was a Host too with the bags under her eyes...she did almost look sick. Why did she reek of moonshine? “Sarge? What happened to you? You’re supposed to be at the edge of downtown.”

Sarge shook her head. “Lied.” Her voice was slurring off her lips.

She had her blind eye to me, so my seething glare was lost on her. “So you’ve just been hiding since yesterday afternoon drinking? What the hell Sarge!”

“I’m scared.” Sarge whimpered. “Didn’t know if I could be here. What if this doesn’t work and she’s stuck like that?”

My shoulders slumped as my rage deflated. We both knew she wouldn’t be stuck like that. Stuck implied that Isabel would live to see the seasons change. She used to love winter. Would sit back and laugh at all the snowmen that had their arms stolen by dogs, drinking hot chocolate with a bendy straw. Still insisting that Sarge wear two gloves even though the cold didn’t register to her burned hand. Dragged me outside to make armies of snow men and igloos to guard the driveway and greet Sarge when she got home from work.

I had been about to move in with them right before the virus hit.

“It’ll work.” I said quietly, I frowned at the bulge in Sarge’s pocket. “Did you bring some moonshine to share? Because I don’t think she can drink anything before they put her on the table.”

Sarge shook her head. “Honey. Isabel loves the stuff, ya know...or at least she did.” She hissed as she eased back to sitting down on the ground next to Gumbo. “Even if it does work, she won’t be the same. Brain damage occurs at 108, she had a fever of 109.8...and how long she’s been like this.” her shoulders trembled. “What if she doesn’t like honey anymore?”

Sarge used to dye her hair the colors of a rainbow’s wet dream. She said it was easier to deal with people staring at the top of her head rather than the shiny hard scars that stretched down the side of her body or her now-milky white eye. It had been a game. Isabel and I would dance around the store grabbing whatever colors we wished and then we’d spend the evening, all three of us, in the bathroom, trying to make the best replica of a kaleidoscope yet in Sarge’s hair, watching campy gay 90’s movies on my tablet as the dye set. She left it longer on one side to hide the spots that wouldn’t grow back, and her ‘gnawed off’ ear.

She had always promised she was fine to us and in a rush of Taiwanese over the phone to her parents overseas. She kept a steady job. She never needed to talk about the explosion or the time an asshole called her a ‘toasted Rainbow Dash’ or why she trembled when she lit the candles on the menorah or why she didn’t like sex or showering with the lights on anymore.

She always promised that she was still strong. That the physical therapy was going fine. That she could protect us from anything. Sarge was never the one that needed to talk, or call in from work because a shower sounded too much like gunfire, but she was there when Isabel was. The noises of fireworks and poppers only ‘surprised’ her. She was only ever ‘just thinking’ when she stopped and stared off into space, hands shaking.

I still found her talking to Gumbo about all the things she’d never say to us. And when the virus broke out she found the Sanctuary had painfully few firefighters left. Five including herself.

She did include herself.

She let her hair fade.

She went back to fighting fires, and denied screaming at night.

The door didn’t do much to muffle Isabel’s screeches.

“I didn’t get drunk enough for this.” Sarge muttered next to me as we stared through the little window at Isabel trying to get out of the restraints. They even had her head and shoulders strapped back. IVs were running into her calf, wires sporadically adhered to her body. “They’re scaring her.”

“Too much stimulation. She might calm down after they give the shot and back off for a bit.” I said, pressing my hands up against the window. “They said she needs six to stop the virus from reproducing in her cells. She might come back after that.” We’d been warned about the possibility that she could stay as unresponsive, just not be contagious anymore. “I’m sorry I wasn’t with you guys when it happened. I might have been able to shoot the Host down before it even got on her.”

Sarge pushed away from the window. "I should have been able to protect her. It's not your fault."

"But it could have been."

Sarge forced a laugh. "And then what? She'd be left with a bad datemate as well as a bad girlfriend." She hung her head. "Sorry I left."

"You can let me be the middle spoon when this is all done to make up for it. We are going to get her back, and you know she hates being the big spoon." I would stay positive if it killed me. "We'll even dye your hair again. As for movies, D.E.B.S. was next on the list."

"I thought it was that cheerleading one." Sarge frowned slightly thinking back. "Holy shit, look at the size of that thing!"

I was looking anywhere but the syringe. Needles were about as pleasant as my uncle. "Tell me when it's done."

"I-I think it's hurting her. They'll stop if it's really hurting her right? They won't just use her like a rat?"

I nodded. Destiny had even stopped by Isabel's cage to introduce herself as Isabel's future doctor, hands flapping in a never ending wave. Destiny wouldn't just keep going if it would hurt Isabel. "Done?"

"They have another one."

I looked back down at the bottom of Sarge's cane.

They came out when it was quiet. Sarge was finally sleeping and drooling on my shoulder. Isabel was being moved to a new room and kept under light sedation. We'd be able to sit with her as long as we had on protective clothing.

That night I dreamt of a full bed.

I tried to shake off the hand on my shoulder. I hadn't been able to sleep much in the weeks Isabel had been put through the more aggressive forms of the treatment. Sarge was hopeful that Isabel could still communicate. Apparently she would whine when something she liked was taken away. This mostly seemed to happen when we played with her hair,

supposedly. It was never loud enough to cross the threshold my ears needed. I blamed the constant stream of 'light sedatives' that kept her calm.

The hand wouldn't leave my shoulder though, so I picked my head up off Isabel's bedside and blinked at Sarge's hands. "She's talking."

I sat up so quickly my chair rocked back. "Isabel?"

Isabel stared at my hands long after they had stopped moving. "Me?" Her voice was almost too quiet, but I could still catch that beautiful baritone.

Sarge was beaming "Yeah, that's your name. Do you know who we are?"

"I think. Fuzzy." Isabel scrunched her nose. "Can't think much."

Sarge and I glanced at each other. Isabel's words came out slow, and a little dizzy. "How are you feeling?" I asked gently.

Isabel frowned working words over in her mouth before putting sound behind them. "Little. Clearer than the yesterdays. Cold. Words are hard."

"It'll get better. Promise." I gave her knee a squeeze as Sarge shrugged off her leather fireman's jacket and draped it over Isabel. "Do you know what happened?"

Isabel frowned at my hands and then down at the sheets. "Fuzzy. Stuck in a box. Didn't really care."

Sarge took a deep breath. "You got infected with Strand Z on a patrol with me. You've been...sick for a few months and you're the first they cured. That's why you're in a hospital now."

I raised an eyebrow at Sarge. That was certainly an abbreviated version. Sarge didn't meet my eye, her hands shaking as she tucked the jacket in snuggler.

Isabel nodded slowly. "I can," she stopped and scrunched her nose. "Can eat? I ea—" she stopped and her throat moved in another whine. "bite—ate? peas—please!" She tried moving the words around in her mouth only to bite her tongue. This time the whine was loud enough for me to hear. "Words are hard."

I gave her knee another squeeze. "Sarge has honey she's been saving for you. I'll go ask if you can have some and let the doctors know you're awake. The words will get better,

we'll help you." I unlocked my wheels and rolled around the bed. Isabel might still have to stay just on the drip, but it never hurt to ask.

"Honey?" Isabel asked.

Sarge nodded, hesitantly pulling the little jar out. "Does that sound good? W-we can get you something else if it doesn't."

Isabel stared at it for a moment before her face brightened, and made a delighted mewling I could just barely hear.

Sarge's shoulders slumped in relief. "You still like honey, then."

"I'm going to roll slow, talk to her." I whispered as I wheeled past them. And I did. I inspected the quality of the plastic plant at the end of the hall before searching out a nurse, and then we went the long way back. I knocked on the door before the nurse pushed it open.

"Hey, what happened to rolling slow?" Sarge greeted us in between wiping tears off her cheeks.

"I did." I said, rolling next to Sarge at Isabel's bedside.

Isabel was squinting at the nurse, who was talking too fast, even for me. "Words." Isabel grumbled, tugging against the restraints on her legs.

"Did you get out what you needed to?" I asked quietly.

Sarge nodded.

"How'd it go?"

Sarge gave a laughing sob. "She gave me a kiss. Said words were too hard."

I gave Sarge's hand a squeeze. "She still likes honey."

Sarge nodded before glancing down at me. "Thanks for not killing me when I was being stupid."

We waited till the nurse left with a clipboard full of answers and permission to give Isabel a few spoons of honey.

He probably hadn't meant that we could undo most of the restraints, but Isabel refused to be spoon-fed. We left the ones at her ankles, and sat back as Isabel wiggled the

honey to her knees and held it right side up. She let me open it, but got her long straw herself.

“Remember they said not too much.” Sarge spoke and signed slowly. “Just a few sips.”

Isabel popped the straw in the jar with her mouth. “No,” she said and ducked away from us slurping happily.

The next two Strand Z victims underwent their first treatment that afternoon.

Macaberet

Kyri Lorenz

We danced like rats by a garbage can,
trash babies on our way to the grand masquerade,
giddy and maggot-intestined, fake IDs in matted fur pouches.
Cause of death: *electrocution*, my card reads.
Yours, *suffocation by drowning*.
You wear a wreath of seaweed
and six pack ring bangles, and I,
charcoal-sooted waistcoat, hair singed
at the tips, fingernails black.

Our costumes are a sufficient trick,
suspicion cast-off, we are bold subjects
of this sunken dominion of souls.
Soon, we will report to the scene, unseen:
or rather, unnoticed, fresh kill with goodwill,
no trace of interloping.

At the door is a skeleton wearing a Bauta.
He checks our IDs and
rattling, wheezy, shaking his skull,
It's always the young'uns these days.
'The Inferno, it's called, for the lost sonsofbitches who
can't afford Elysium up the block.
You grab us two glasses of
formaldehyde, with little black umbrellas,
and join me by the firepit, where

I'm talking – arguing really – with
Marie Antoinette, who demands proof
that one would look so pristine after fiery demise.
She holds her glaring head under one arm,
eyes piercing through her Columbina mask.
You, my lovely rodent-escort,
with a methanol chalice in each hand,
bubbles of wet anger fountaining out
of you, wl from your bowels, a sound
only animate flesh-pets could make – and the others
descend, surround us with claws and rotting teeth,
pulling off your crown, mhoy vest, proclaiming
our rosey-cheeks, breathing-skin, *not dead at all*

Polluted

Michelle Mangano

I was looking for treasure on the trash covered shore when I came across the mermaid's body.

I thought she was just a mannequin at first. Stranger things had ended up on this beach. I was thinking about the logistics getting a dummy to market and how much I could get it for when a gag-inducing stench wafted up to me.

When I was done spitting in the sand, I dug a bandanna out of my pocket and tied it around my face. After all my years of digging through putrid waste, even I wasn't immune to the smell of rotten flesh.

It was only when I got closer that I noticed her tail. An invisible hand clutched my heart. Though I had only ever seen mermaids in old pictures and storybooks, I knew what she was. The merchants old enough to remember always told stories about them. They used to come up to the shore to trade with the townsfolk, bringing unusual medicines and beautiful pearls. But that was when the water was clear. When the trash started piling up, the mermaids stopped coming. From time to time, other shore-diggers claimed they saw a flick of a fin on the horizon, but no one ever believed them.

I knelt down next to the body and glanced over it. She must have washed up fairly recently. Her hair was still heavy with water and her skin did not bear the distinct tears that the crows made when they picked at something. I was lucky to be the first to find her.

I put my hands on her side and pushed her. She was light and went over easy. I brushed my hands against the warm sand, trying to wipe away the feeling of her cold, clammy skin.

The mermaid may have been beautiful once, but the seas had not been kind to her. Black oil thoroughly soaked through her hair, making it difficult to see the real color. Her green eyes were completely bloodshot and her lips were a dark shade of blue. Foul smelling oil oozed out of her mouth and gummed up her gills. Her sickly gray skin stretched out

tightly over her bones. The tips of her green tail were white and badly frayed, suggesting disease.

On an initial glance, she did not seem to be carrying anything valuable. A necklace of bottle caps and soda tabs ringed her neck. Plastic bangles and rubber bands hung around her thin wrists. Multiple fishhooks hung from her ears. I poked my fingers through the one bit of clothing she had: a top woven out of seaweed and plastic bags. I removed it from her body and examined it, trying to find any secret compartments tucked inside. But the top fell apart in my hands, too rotted away.

I saw a plastic bag wound around one of her wrists. I dumped it out, hoping that I could get something rare. A rubber duck, a cracked china doll, an empty shampoo bottle, a scallop shell, several batteries landed in the sand. I scooped the shell up and looked over it for a moment. The outside edge was sharpened.

I looked down at my collection. Most of what she had wasn't exactly exotic, but I could palm most of it off for cheap change. I transferred the contents of her bag into my own. I took her "jewelry." As I put my findings in my pack, I felt a bit of aggravation creeping into me. All of the old fogies in the market said that mermaids were supposed to have great things on them, yet all I found on this one was junk. I could have found better things without having to touch a dead body.

I stared at the body for a few long moments, trying to figure out what to do. I then reached out and gently rubbed a lock of her hair. Black gunk squished between my fingers.

I stood up and grabbed the mermaid by the wrists. I dragged her body to the shore and placed her down in a shallow part of the water. Once she was submerged, hair spread out underneath the water, moving like black water snakes. I took off my shoes and hiked up my shorts before kneeling in the water next to her. Using her empty plastic bag, I began to scrub her hair. Soon, the water was gray from the oil. Little by little, I could see a light auburn peeking through the black.

Once the hair was in a manageable state, I grabbed the mermaid beneath her armpits and heaved her up, resting her head on my lap. I took out a pair of rusty scissors from my backpack and began to cut up long sections of hair. As I worked, I tried to avoid the

mermaid's eyes. Soon, the plastic bag was heavy with hair and the mermaid looked more ragged than ever.

I slipped my legs out from under her head, letting her fall back to the shore with a wet slap. I rinsed my scissors out in the water, getting rid of the remaining hairs. Once I was finished, I looked over to her. She lay half submerged in the water, staring up at the sky. I looked around until I found another plastic bag nearby. I put it over her head. I didn't want those sightless eyes staring at me for this next part.

I took out the scallop from my pocket and headed over to her tail. I began scraping the scales. It was rough work. The scales were reluctant to come off and took several tries with the scallop to pry free. Every so often, I would have to dip the shell into the water. Soon, the water turned a pale shade of pink.

It took me a long time to collect a small pile of scales. As I piled them up in the water to clean them, I was already thinking of a way to sell them. I would take the bigger and prettier scales and sell them individually, maybe marketing them as jewelry or good luck charms. The less handsome scales could be crushed up into powder. I could convince some fool that it was a special kind of medicine. Either way, I would make them sell.

I only stopped when the entire tale was bare. I scooped up the scales, admiring them in the sunshine before putting them into my bag. I washed the scallop one last time before putting that away as well. I took a moment to look over at the mermaid again, wondering if I could take anything else from her. I decided against it. I had no way to extract her remaining blood and removing her bones would be far too difficult and messy. The eyes and tail were unattractive and would never sell, no matter how much I pushed. Even the gullible tourists at the market demanded quality.

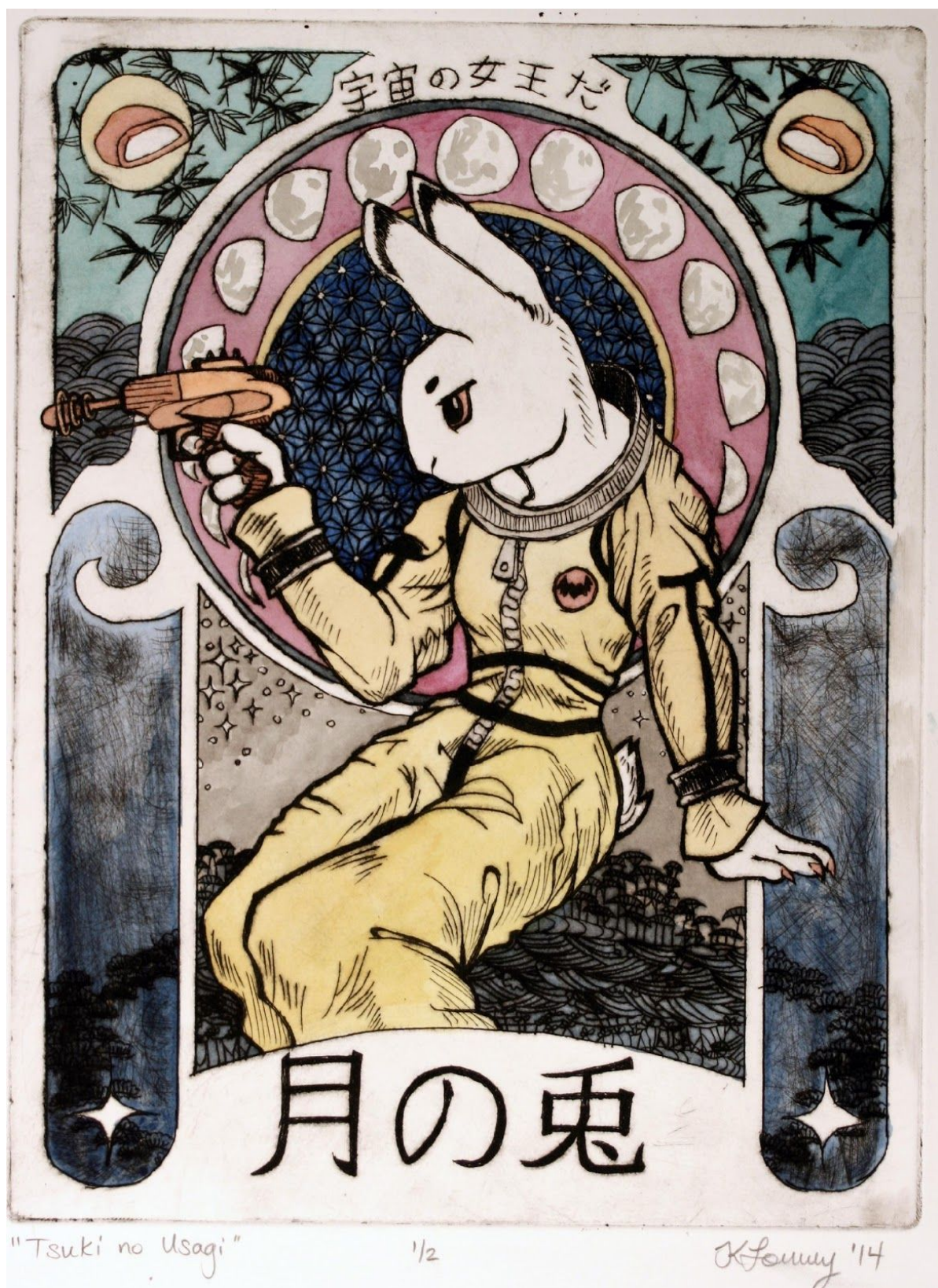
I stood up and grabbed the mermaid's wrists again. With my back to the ocean, I began to drag her deeper into the water. Progress was slow. I had to be careful where I stepped, since broken glass could be buried in the silt. The first few meters were especially difficult, since it was clogged with trash. I had to continually stop to clear a path for myself.

I stopped once the water was level to my chest. I sidestepped and pulled on the mermaid so that she would be level with me. I piled the trash floating around me on top of the mermaid. I even stuck a few of the heavier debris in the bag that still covered her head.

She was completely covered up by trash before she began to dip beneath the waves. I let go of her wrist and watched her progress. I had to add a few more bits of garbage to encourage her along. It took a long time for her to sink completely.

Once she was gone, I turned around and walked back to the shore. It probably wouldn't take long for her to come back up to the surface again. But there was the slimmest chance that she would sink beneath the waves, never to rise again. It would be better that way.

Some things are better if they remained buried.



"Tsuki no Usagi"

1/2

K. Lenny '14

Tsukino Usagi Kyri Lorenz

Search for a Heart Stone

Maura Lydon

'This, my dears, is a changeling. Their mother was a human; a huntress wise to the ways of faeries. Faeries whose haunts rather happened to coincide with her own trap lines. Imagine, if you will, the snowy hills and wind-shaved trees. The hidden snares and sprung traps that she checked with frosty clouds spinning her life away. And the small, shadowed fae who hunt the hunter. They tracked her every day, waiting for a missed step, weaving a snowy web. Biding their time for the inevitable day it would close over her head. *SNAP*.

Once faerie traps close, they do not open again. Not unless they are paid. And the huntress paid her price, though she did not know how dear her inhuman child's life would be. Faithfully, the fae left her on the snowy slope outside her solar-heated cabin, retreating as silently as a wave of pine-scented skin, back to their trees and dark caves.

She was pregnant for only a month before giving birth to an egg the size of a large grapefruit. Gods only know why she decided to keep it safe, to turn it in an ancient iron pot next to the fire so it would stay warm. Living as hunters do, she had no need to hide the unnatural pregnancy and birth from human neighbors, at least. Even a cabin as isolated as hers had a garden under slanted windows, and machines to harvest and heat the rain, or more often, the snow.

The poor changeling child had a good mother, while she lasted. She gave her feathered offspring wooden toys, and fed them on her milk so rich and warm. The changeling that hatched looked male in the common way, but we all know how common ways tend to work out. In respect for our hero, we shall call them 'they'. And their mother loved them despite the frequent molts, the way their teeth would sometimes change into a beak. But faeries, especially cold-hearted faeries that live where no creature sees the eye of day for months, those fae always know when something is owed to them.

They came back on the child's first birthday.

The wolves howled that night, sensing the tension the faeries were stirring. The huntress was used to the threats of the wild, and having fallen prey to magic once before, she had taken precautions. Dried lavender bunches hung over the windows, and ivy had been

planted around the circumference of the house. An electric fence hummed over window-sills, while 3D-printed iron spikes decorated the chimney. Ward-stones had been put in each corner of the property, but still the wolves and fae howled, rattling the windows with terrible song, until the huntress opened the door, an iron poker in one hand.

Everything fell silent. The wind died down to nothing. The wolves stopped singing as the small, pine-skinned faeries stepped into the light of the home. “What do you want?” She asked, ready to attack if the small folk came too close.

“Blood is owed.”

“I gave you plenty of blood,” she hissed.

“Give me my child.” There was no telling which of the creatures had spoken; shadows flickered across craggy faces with features that only vaguely mimicked those of men.

“He is mine too.” The huntress protested, but quietly. Quietly.

“The blood is owed. You will give it to me, or we will take it.” And the huntress, mother that she was, shivered and looked away. She let the poker fall to the floor, where it clattered on the doorframe. The fae whistled to each other, warning of the acid sting should iron touch their bark-like skin. But they did not move from their places. And she came back to the door with the crying child in her arms. The babe looked close to three years old, but such is the way when fae blood mingles with human.

“The blood is owed.” The fae pressed forward, reaching out twig-fingers for the child. Lips twisted, the huntress stayed very still as her child was taken from her.

“The blood was owed.” She breathed, and stood shivering in the draught of wind that swept up the faeries, and her child.

When the child was reaching the end of any formative years they might have had, their father decided that he’d done enough, and stranded them on the night-swept tundra. Their survival had more to do with the fortitude of a half-fae than their father being able to calculate how long they could last without shelter. Owl, for that was what the small one liked

to call themselves, was left raw, in many senses of the word.

They were left without supervision, and by extension, without purpose. Where should they go now? What should they do?

To their mind, it was only by random choice they traveled southeast. But between you and I, dear reader, we can disclose it was not random choice at all. By the first wingbeats that turned the changeling in that direction, the beginning steps of a quest had been taken. And once you start a quest, there is no stopping until the tale is done.

This is the true tale, the one you are here for, the one you *need* to listen to...but that tale does not begin until they reach Thunder Bay. It was the first great city Owl ever visited. Faeries aren't exactly fond of human civilizations, even if those civilizations are on the road to recovering from the dying of the Information Age. Owl had never seen a TV screen before, let alone the hyperspace modules that were scattered across the city like telephone booths. They were used to the pale emptiness of the tundra, not the walls of carefully cultivated green that covered all the skyscrapers. They might not be able to use any of the technology that buzzed around them like a cloud, but they could sense it was there. Networks of artificial connection that Owl had never had a chance to approach while under their father's care. The faeries had punished the changeling child with unexpected severity at any mention of even the smallest pure-human sentiment.

As for what drew Owl here, well. Perhaps we will wait, and you can find out with them. The lack of open space made their skin crawl. So many human lives pulsed together like dim light bulbs, and none aware of the magic that tugged Owl in this direction. Their entrance to the city was largely unmarked, leaving them hiding in the corner of a fire escape between brick and concrete and worn ceramic railings. Instinctively Owl ruffled their feathers, hoping to drive away the unease that crept under their skin. It didn't work, but they did startle a rat. Before the rodent could blink they snatched up the meal, desperately hungry after such a long flight. Not a soul had stopped to ask after a ragged barn owl or a scruffy human sleeping the day away on roadsides.

Flying had been the easiest way to get into the city without comment, but to find the object of their quest, they would need to walk. In the morning, they would start looking for

the Power that drew them south.

In a human shape, Owl barely managed to keep above standards for the city's lowest classes. Their too-big scavenged sweater and torn pants were poor replacements for the insulation of feathers. The savage looks they got from walking humans almost reminded them of home. They smiled wryly, thinking of how human and faerie seemed to be more alike than either wanted to admit. Dark hair, almost feather-fine, fell across the changeling's features, covering a diamond-shaped face, beaky nose, and light, coppery skin.

Before Owl had walked two blocks they were wishing for wings again. After all, humans are excellent at designing things on too large a scale. The changeling walked from daybreak to noon, and not once was there a break in the buildings. Everything looked different from the curiously narrow view of a human body. Where shrubby plants did not cover the walls and sidewalks, glass windows gleamed with light. Many of the windows were projectors, advertising the store's contents with glittering displays and insisting that attention be paid to the open doorways.

Owl kept trying to turn their head further than it wanted to go, wincing at each reluctant crack in their neck. They were used to having more vertebrae. The constant stream of cars taking up any and all of the roadways would have been silent, if the drivers and passengers hadn't been filling the air with the sound of their insults and conversations.

After only four hours Owl was exhausted; flying all night and walking by day might not have been the best plan ever conceived. Though the first few grocery stores they passed held none of Owl's interest, walking through a farmer's market had a noticeably different impression on the changeling. Raw fruits and vegetables weren't new to them; the faeries had loved stealing from cold-stunted orchards. But there were also huge kettles of popcorn, a wide variety of baked goods, and even one farmer grilling up sausages to sell. The atmosphere of friendly competition wasn't one Owl had ever been exposed to before, and they were surprised to find themselves relaxing. Everyone still shot them angry looks, and drew ever-so-slightly away when Owl walked by. They lingered in front of the popcorn kettle longest, scuffing at the concrete with one foot. The smells of hot oil and butter were so

unlike anything they'd ever smelled before. A nose used to the biting wind and barren branches might be overwhelmed, especially if that nose was most often a beak.

Not quite brave enough to try begging, Owl left the market still hungry. They needed a place to sleep and hunt. The individual trees planted at occasional distances along the roads were useless, but at last they came upon a tiny park hidden away in a courtyard of buildings. With much relief, Owl changed shape and hid their ragged clothes under the leaves, eyes blinking constantly to keep out the uncomfortable amount of light.

Probably they had not meant to spend all the rest of the day sleeping. Even in their dreams the magic tugged, refusing to let the changeling rest. When Owl finally woke again the light had not abated, but it had changed into too-bright LED street lamps and neon-red holograms that flickered uncertainly in the chilly winds. They took the time to hunt for more rats before changing back; no matter how in love they were with the smells of human food, they had nothing to bargain with. No money to speak of, and even the clothes on their back barely belonged to them.

The looks people gave them back out on the street were harsher, but also more silent. There was a sharper edge of danger about now, though this was nothing compared to the fear that their faerie father had kept around him like a cloak. This hunt for magic was different from any they had ever attempted. They were relying on the beat inside their chest, not any mouse-print or flutter of movement.

The beat they were tracking grew feeble as they started down another street, more deserted than most. Pieces of paper drifted like down across the holed asphalt; across one window a woman made of red light danced provocatively, her glittering electric smile fixed outwards onto the empty street.

The changeling turned to go back, to find where their magical 'heart' beat strongest. And three humans stood in their way. Let us take a moment to appreciate this, the first true encounter with pure-humans that little Owl has had. Of course the three were following them for a reason. The Rootless like to keep tabs on possibly-malignant magic sparking up so close to human cities. And the Rootless, talented though some are at the Craft, have nothing compared to the power of even a half-fae like Owl. You may now better understand

the resentment these three felt.

The group of four stood very still. It was the moment before diving, the moment after sighting prey. But Owl was unused to being prey.

“What’re you looking for, boy?” The central figure asked, his voice a low unhealthy rasp. Owl’s confusion momentarily outweighed their awareness of *danger*. So they answered with the obvious,

“I’m not a boy.”

“Sorry then, *girl*,” Left was higher-pitched, female. “What’re you looking for?” “Not your business. And I’m not a girl, either,” Owl was still unconcerned. They had survived childhood at the hands of faeries. Three pure-humans weren’t going to be able to do much more than scratch them. Oh how we would like to tell them otherwise. But we will save our knowledge; it is harder won than Owl could know.

Right stepped forward, into the light of a dancing-girl hologram. “Okay, let’s stop lying, changeling. Tell us what you’re looking for.”

Owl’s gaze rolled over to Right slowly, unable to resist a smile at how angry he was. This human was short, with broad shoulders and a scruffy chin. The point that really caught the changeling’s interest, though, was the iron brooch pinned to his jacket: a ring in the shape of twisted roots. Even from twenty paces, there was a sickening sting to the iron. Now that Owl noticed it, they could feel it coming from all three, and their tiny smile vanished.

“I don’t know what I’m looking for,” they said, mouth drying in sudden realization. The balance of power was not what it had seemed, and the changeling was afraid of their prior miscalculation.

All three stepped closer and Owl backed away, not wanting to be any closer to that iron. All three wore the same brooch, and Owl couldn’t be certain the humans didn’t have actual weapons made of iron. “Of course you do. Your fae parent sent you here, to meddle in magic that doesn’t belong to you.”

This was contrary to everything Owl had been taught. *All magic belongs to the fae*. But Owl wasn’t going to argue, and certainly not in favor of faeries. “I don’t know what I’m looking for,” they repeated.

“You’re starting to sound boring, changeling,” Center growled. “And you don’t want us to get bored.” The four were walking steadily now, Owl retreating and the Rootless advancing.

“I don’t know what I’m looking for—” Owl started, and raised a hand to ward off the humans’ angry responses. “I can feel it pulling at me. Here,” They touched their chest, feeling the faint thump of the ‘heart’. The three glanced at each other, and Owl could feel the absence of their attention.

It would be helpful I think, reader, if you knew that the Rootless do have the best interests of humanity at heart. They are understandably wary of faeries, and the assumption that Owl was working for their fae father was warranted. In this case, it was simply wrong.

The changeling stopped walking, pulling a little at their sleeves so they could change shape when the Rootless returned to the object of their hunt. It would mean leaving their only clothes behind, but they would rather live with that than stay near so much iron. Center rasped something at Left, who snarled back something angry. Right brought down his foot and shook the road. “We take *it* to the magic instead, then!” He said in a half-shout, the only part of the conversation the changeling could hear properly.

Owl didn’t wait to hear any more; they pulled away the sweater and let themselves melt. The three rushed forward, but Owl was small and light by then. They could fly and the Rootless could not. In a great display of both common sense and pity, Owl did not so much as slash open their scalps when they flew by. Instead they vanished over the buildings, stopping to rest their dark-accustomed eyes as often as they dared. After all, owls were not made for cities that are never dark. They took perch in another park, larger than the last and at least marginally more peaceful.

The three would still be hunting. It would help the changeling if they knew what they had done to so offend the humans in the first place. That would be difficult, though. They had done nothing. The only way for this to end, as Owl saw it, was to find the heart and escape before any more Rootless came looking for them. That meant a rather tightened schedule. Owl let their eyes flicker shut for a moment. They were well and truly awake now, but wandering a pure-human city naked would attract attention. It was also a little cold for

skin unprotected by feathers.

So Owl stole a set of nice jeans, a jacket, and a T-shirt that said 'badwolf' in a font probably supposed to look like graffiti. The theft wasn't even difficult, just a shift in the cover behind a blaring hologram, and a quick fist fight in a shadowed alley. The only regret Owl might have kept came from the fact that changeling was taking out their fear of the Rootless's iron on a defenseless human. But Owl didn't kill the man, which was much, much kinder than any faerie would have been.

Following the heart had only grown more difficult with the forced detour. Owl was doubly alert for any prickle of iron against their skin, and it distracted them from the sometimes-faint pulse within their chest. Still, the changeling was more hurried now there was race to win. Knowing nothing of the Rootless's motivations, it is quite likely Owl put their pursuers into a category very similar to the one they gave to the fae. *Avoid at all costs.*

Owl had narrowed it down to an area of several blocks, near the coldest part of the city. The concrete and asphalt here gave way to lake water, deep and treacherous. This was a more industrial part of town, where lights were few and far between.

There was no sign of the Rootless. Owl stopped walking when the pulsing of the magic eclipsed the beating of their own heart. It took them an inordinately long time to figure out where the beat was coming from, but eventually they saw the gleam of metal in grass. The door was half-buried by weeds, dust, and trash washed up next to a drainage pipe; the glint had come from the hinges of the half-hidden entrance. The handle was brass, cold but without the poisonous sting iron held for those of fae blood.

It smelled of old death, there below the earth. It smelled of death so old the dead had turned from bone to dust, from fresh reek to ancient filmy secrets that clung to the changeling's hands and hair and nose. The uneven stairs ended in a cellar darker than any cloudy night. Even owl eyes would be unable to pierce it.

They stepped slowly into the dark, barely lifting their feet from the ground. Owl coughed a little as the dust scratched thin fingers down the inside of their throat. There was a skitter of stone against stone, somewhere out in the darkness, and they crouched lower, feeling the smooth dust of years against their fingertips. Their ears were human, but they

remembered the keenness of their other form, and they reached out in the direction of the sound. Owl reached...and their palm brushed against something warm.

They flinched away, but there was a fragment of light that had not been there before. There was a stone on the ground in front of them, and it was glowing with the same beat that was shaking their bones. The stone was smooth all around, polished into some strange, irregular shape. Owl reached out to it again, and when they touched it, the beating in their chest vanished. Instead they could feel the pulsing in their fingers where they touched the rock. The warmth of it spread through the changeling's body, magic as warm as living blood.

Newly-lit dirt walls hunched over Owl like fallen grave stones. The room was swirled with dust they had disturbed on their way in, and the entire place seemed to close around the stone they held carefully in one fist. Watching the dust spin was almost dizzying. Owl closed their eyes, shaking a little with the sudden surge of magic through their veins, then ducked out through the narrow exit. Cupping the stone carefully in both hands, they were shedding clothes by the time they reached the stairs. The second heart in their hands was *theirs* in a way nothing else had ever been. It did not belong to the Rootless, and it certainly did not belong to their fae father. They were winged by the time they reached the surface, and the heart-stone they clung to lit the street with rays like sunshine.

The Superfluous Quest

Many Moore

He rode in like a fairytale,
a glittering knight in armor green,
his eyes so hopeful like a ship set sail,
off to find his golden faerie queen.

A glittering knight in armor, green,
he lost his way and begged my aid
to find his golden faerie queen
who slept beneath a silver glade.

He lost his way and begged my aid—
I told him I could show him where
to find the sleeping, silver glade,
for I myself had once slept there.

I told him I could show him where
the queens endure enchanted rest,
for I myself had once slept there
until a knight might take the quest.

Queens must endure enchanted rest,
but I was not content to stay
until a knight might take the quest—
I woke myself and left one day.

I was not content to stay,
but no one told this knight so green
that I could wake and leave one day—
he insisted *he'd* save his queen.

No one told this knight in green,
so he rode in, told his faerie-tale,
insisting he would save his queen,
his eyes so hopeful, a ship set sail.

And in the Garden

Lucretia Bell

Just before Happily Ever After, the boy neared the end of his journey. And he came at last to the garden of legend and saw the little girl that they had said would be there. She was small and she was crying.

“Why are you crying, little girl?” he asked, but she did not answer. She only looked at him and wiped eyes still glinting wet, and then she asked him why he came.

So he told her of a kingdom where nothing would grow, and a princess in a tower, so lonely and so lovely, whose heart he had already and whose hand he would gain if only he could save her homeland. The little girl wept to hear his story, and she took a small knife and drew it across her palm. Three drops of blood welled up, and, collecting them in a tiny vial, she gave it to him.

She spoke: “Take this, and where a drop falls, for leagues around the soil will be fertile. Take this, and the ruler of the kingdom will surely reward you.”

And it was just as the little girl had said, and the kingdom was saved, and he married the princess.

Not long after, the king, who was aged already, at long last fell into that eternal sleep from which no urging may rouse, and the boy became the king.

In time, the crops came in less and less, and after five years, he said to the queen “I must go journey to the garden once more.”

The way was easier this time; he knew it better.

The girl was in the garden, exactly as before.

Three more drops fell from her palm.

“You’ll come visit me again, I hope?”

“If it should prove necessary, I shall return with a grateful heart.”

“You waited too long this time. It will be necessary, and if you return sooner, the danger to your people will be less.”

“In three years time, then, my friend, I will visit you again.”

For many years, it continued like this, his country growing larger and more prosperous.

She never aged a day.

It grew more and more difficult to get away from his duties to make the journey, for it could only be done alone, and even with his swiftest horse and a well-known path it still took too many days, and at the end could only be traveled on foot. But still he came, once every three years, as he had promised when he was a young man.

The king grew older, and the journeys harder as his body grew softer. His old bones grew weary. His people grew in multitudes. And as his kingdom grew larger and larger, the farms that once had kept the population in bounty, with spare crops to sell to foreign lands, now grew barely enough to stave off famine.

Every time he visited, he would ask:

“My friend, if you could only give me more.”

“It is all I can spare. Any more would do no good.”

“Only a little.”

“I can give no more than I do.”

“Then come back with me.”

“I could not bear it. If you would take me from my garden then you might as soon cut the bleeding heart from my chest and thereby squeeze out your blood.”

The king was old now, and he put the journey off for as long as he could, his body protesting the long ride and the longer walk. And he was so busy. He put it off for longer than ever before, nearly four years from his last visit. Too long. His wife, the queen, would not eat while her people starved, and when she grew sick and near death, he knew he could wait no longer, even if the journey should kill him. On the day she died, he saddled his swiftest horse, clutched the reins in shivering, crinkled hands, and set off down the long road.

Every step of his horse was torture. His body jolted on the road, but that was nothing compared to his heart. On the wayside he saw the bodies of his people, lying where

they fell. Famine-wracked men tilled cracked and unforgiving soil. With every hour he took, more of his people died.

When he reached the point where his horse could go no further, he walked. And when he could no longer walk, he crawled. He was dragging himself through the dust when he reached her, a withered old nut of a man, and she had not aged a day since the day he met her, many years ago.

He asked her again, for three drops could never be enough.

“My friend, if you could only give me more.”

There was new desperation in his voice, but, as always, her answer was the same.

“It is all I can spare. Any more would do no good.”

“Only a little. My people are dying.”

“I can give no more than I do.”

“Then come back with me.”

“I could not bear it. If you would take me from my garden then you might as soon cut the bleeding heart from my chest and thereby squeeze out the blood.”

His strength was nearly gone, but she was small and had only the force of a child.

“Then I must do what I must.”

He tried to pull her away, but she fought like a kitten afraid of drowning and he saw at last that she would never, could never come.

“I am sorry, but I must do what I must.”

And so he pulled out his old sword, still shining, well-kept. And he carved out her heart.

She fell.

He carried her heart back with him, and it bled all the way. Flowers welled up where the blood drops fell along his path.

At last he reached his kingdom, and he squeezed the heart, and blood poured out in great streams. But no flowers sprouted. The blood flowed and flowed, and fell in impassive puddles on the dead, cold earth.

He tried and

tried.

But

nothing

would

grow.

And in the garden, the little girl cried.



"Not by Sword or Shield" Kyri Lorenz

Cornelia and the Harpy

Maura Lydon

The noon-white sun beat down on me like a hammer against an anvil. It was the heat that woke me. I stirred and rolled to get out of the sunlight, groaning at the sudden pain in my shoulders as I moved into the feeble shade of some stone outcropping. The sand beneath me stuck to my sweaty skin and wormed its way into my clothes, chafing flesh already tender from the harsh sun. I lay motionless for a time, cataloging my pain as I had been taught by Sergeant Atrius.

The sunburn I knew was from my forced march across the Thalosian desert. It had been burn or die of thirst, and I had chosen to burn. The rashes that would undoubtedly emerge from my rolling in a sand pit were not yet a problem, so I could ignore them. My shoulders, though, lead to the real questions. Where was I, and how had I gotten here?

When I looked, I saw a mottling of dark bruises across my upper arms and body, along with three scores on each shoulder that had not quite broken my skin. And with a flash, I remembered.

I had been marching, my ancestor's spear little more than a heavy walking stick in my hand, when a welcome shadow had relieved the sun for half a second. Tired and burning with thirst, I had looked up too late to brace myself. The shadow's claws snatched away my spear, and I was left helpless in the harpy's rancid grip. I remembered the deafening beat of her wings about my head, the rasp of harsh feathers against my skin, and the ringing sensation when a bone struck my skull. There was nothing beyond that.

I sat up slowly, my first weakness giving way to a soldier's instinctive survey of her surroundings. I sat at the bottom of a huge sandstone well, with arching walls carved by winds into shapes both familiar and alien. The sun shone down from an oculus far above, plenty wide enough for me to climb through... if I could get up there. The sand that covered the ground was red as blood. Difficult footing, but not impossible to fight on.

Growling to myself at the pain of movement, I stood and began to pace the semi-circular walls of my prison. There was no way I would consent to end my quest like this. I had come so far, further than any hero I had heard of. I was so close to Phao City I

could almost see the ruined towers rising out of the sands before me. "Praeli, lord of soldiers, let me get out of this alive." I pleaded to my patron, but without hope that he would hear me. The god of war's attention would be more dearly bought than with one woman's prayer.

It was then, as I moved along the edges of the well, that I saw the bones. The bleached whiteness of them glared against the red of the stone and the sand. I saw one, then another, then an entire ribcage. When I shivered, the skin across my shoulders broke. This time I managed to keep in my curses, gritting my teeth against the seep of blood.

The walls of this place were solid stone, covered by shades of carmine and vermilion that travelled in waves around me. I felt almost dizzy as I walked along beside them, blinking constantly to keep the illusion of tide-bound stone away. It was impossible to tell when I had traced a full circle; there had been nothing to mark my unconscious body but the sand, and that had been disturbed by my own feet. But I stopped walking after a time, pressing my back cautiously to the wall as I rested. The walls here were solid rock; I could see no weakness or even the smallest crack to let me through. Truly, the only way out was the oculus; a wide red opening to the desert sky and inching sun, bloody as a toothless maw.

Caceus needed me alive and by the gods' Names I was going to stay that way. I couldn't afford to be trapped in a harpy's nest. I couldn't afford to let my lover die just because I got kidnapped by some stupid monster. The sickness that was sweeping through all of Runea had finally come to try and steal Caceus away: I wouldn't let it. If I had to fight my way out of here, if I had to dig through the coarse sand until my hands bled, if I had to break the stone with nothing but my legs and arms, then I would. For him, I would.

I looked away from the unhelpful sky, and just as I did, a shadow fell across it. The sunlight that had made a bright bleached circle in the middle of the well vanished, and with it a surprising amount of warmth. I tugged at the torn strips of my tunic, useless protection against the temporary chill, and watched the harpy circle down to meet me.

It's bird legs bent backwards, so that even when it landed and stood tall there was no mistaking it for human. But I did not expect it's human torso to be so beautiful. Eyes the dark of roasted almonds, skin the black of ripened olives. Even the wings, even where they

turned to human shoulders with grotesque tufts of down. Even they had the brightness of the morning sea. I wished for nothing more than my spear in hand, so I could skewer it right through its bared breasts. I wanted a trophy of this monster.

It may have seen my fists curl up in anger, or it may have read the expression on my face. "My my, what a hero we have here." It spoke, which I was not expecting. Its words dripped from its pink tongue in heavy drops of wine, tight braids of hair shifting away from its face in a shining curtain. "I must say I was not expecting someone like you caught in my net."

"What is that supposed to mean?" I demanded, unafraid.

"I doubt you came looking for me, darling," the harpy smirked. "You must be on your way somewhere *important*, with a spear like you had."

"Give it back."

"I don't think so." Its eyes narrowed, and one clawed foot shifted in the sand.

"Not yet."

"That is my father's spear, engraved with our—"

"Tch tch tch." It chirped at me, and in the face of that unnerving sound I fell silent. "*Boring*. Tell me what your quest is, tiny hero."

"Do you always play with your meals before you eat them?" I asked, curling my lip.

"Only the ones I am curious about."

I opened my mouth to snap out a response, but found I didn't have one. The silence in the cave echoed with the sound of feathers for a moment. Resentfully, I crossed my arms and looked at the gleaming ribcage.

"I was going to get a healing chalice from Phao."

"And what would a blackbird like you want with one of those?"

I glared at the monster, hoping it would be the first to attack so that I could punch it properly without charging right into its claws. "It is not for me. It's for my amator, my betrothed."

The harpy cackled, "Well, that *is* a worthy quest. I am almost sorry to have waylaid

it." Its cheerful smile fell away with startling speed, leaving only the face of a predator. "Too bad. You won't be getting back."

"Stop talking to me then!" I shouted. "I don't understand. Why aren't I dead already?"

"Because I have not talked to anyone in thirty years," the harpy snapped back, ruffling its wings. "Because you were the first thing to cross my path on a Monday. Because you carried a spear. Because you were black-haired. Because I wasn't hungry."

It spoke so rapidly that I had no time to dwell on any one reason, and I didn't think any of them were true. But what more could I expect from a monster? "If you're not going to let me go, I think you ought to eat me," I said, pushing myself to my feet. The monster was still several inches taller than I was. I tried not to let that bother me.

"Darling, we haven't even gotten to the beginning," it said sweetly.

"Then what do you *want*?" I asked, my voice making staccato echoes against the stone walls. The harpy smiled and fanned out one wing like a bow. The wide green feathers swept close to me, and the sand of the floor shifted with the wind of it.

"How pleased I am that you have asked." It turned and started a strutting walk around the red-stone well, wings occasionally extending for emphasis. "Lesson one. How does one become a monster?"

I stared at it, confused. It looked back at me as if waiting for a response, shaking long thin braids back over one shoulder. "Well my darling, one must do very little. Monsters are never eager to be made, but the world is just *waiting* to create them. All one must do is... step. Step outside, step on an egg, step on a child. Step. Over. The line." With each word it strutted in front of me, each description one more stride of its grotesque feet, hooked claws clenching in the sand.

"Blood is easy to draw with," it whispered, and a chill ran up my spine. For half a second, I had forgotten what I was talking to in the bitterness of its speech. "But it is very, very difficult to erase."

I shrugged, forcing myself to stay calm. "What monsters choose to do with their time is not my concern." The words forced themselves past my teeth, a flaunt of defiance I

was not sure I wanted.

"Ah ah." The harpy's voice was sharp. She rebuked me as soundly as if she had buffeted me with her wings. "We mustn't forget that the word monster calls to heroes as corpses do to ravens." By the end of her sentence she was spitting out words like broken teeth from her beautiful lips, and she had turned to face me head on, wings held down so that they trailed behind her like a cape.

"I didn't—" I started to speak.

"I didn't, I don't, I wish," she mocked me, and I avoided her almond eyes. "That's what they all say, once they are here."

I swallowed. She seemed to be done with her speech, so surely I would be dead in a few seconds. But I was still thinking about what she had said, and for one moment I doubted what she was.

She let the silence ring in our ears, and I was glad of it. "You're still going to kill me," I said at last, and it was not a question.

For a moment the harpy didn't answer. She folded her wings up close to her chest and looked up at the blue above. It was my turn to watch her closely. I saw that she almost answered twice. "Of course," She said at last. "That's what monsters do, my darling. That is what monsters do."

The Song of the Enchanted Grove

Samantha Stone

There's a grove in the forest
where nary a creature goes,
except when the owl calls
and the white moon rises full.
There's an old mossy stump
and a circle of mushrooms.
The air smells of elderberries
and gold honey-suckle.
The wolf, he'll avoid it,
and the elf, he'll walk on.
The bravest man will sight it
and then dare not tarry long.
But when the sun has fallen
and the moon peers down on all,
the grove becomes a festival
of drink and laugh and song.

So dance in the circle
while the merry music plays.
We'll sing until the music stops
at the shining dawn of day.

When the songs have started
and each throat carries a tune,
the birds and beasts awaken
to join the madness, too.
The stags with all their harems
prance through the wooded groves.
The wolves set to their howling
and the bears lumber in tow.
The birds sing and cry,
flitting down among the trees.
Rabbits run amok and every
creature is filled with glee.
Wild though they are,
they will not stay away.
They all join the circle,
where the Elves and humans play.

So dance in the circle
while the merry music plays.
We'll sing until the music stops
at the shining dawn of day.
And you can dance with any fair maid
who happens by that way.
But mortal do be wary,
for the Elven drink is strong.

The Elves are a cunning race,
ancient and quite wise.
Their tunes are weaved from running brooks,
storms, and ocean tides.
Their sharp wine, it is brewed
from the forest berry vines.
It'll make you feel your heart's afire
and your soul will never die.
The wildest of beasts and
the meekest ones as well
go to the grove as though bewitched
by the Elves' great festival.
But should a mortal step within
that torch-lit forest glade,
he'll find himself swept away
by the spell of a masquerade.

So dance in the circle
while the merry music plays.
We'll sing until the music stops
at the shining dawn of day.
And you can dance with any fair maid
who happens by that way.
But mortal do be wary,
for the Elven drink is strong.
Many a man has lost his mind
once the spells and songs are sung.
And you had best be cautious
lest you too get lost this night.

What The Cat Dragged In

Kyri Lorenz

The wicker loveseat creaks under her as she shifts her weight. The cushions are getting flat again. Pins and needles jag over her bottom and up her spine, but she does her best not to wince, lest she wake the pile of cats snoozing beside her. She might have to restuff the seats soon. Maybe a nice beating on the porch, too, to get all that buildup of cat hair out of the cotton fibers. Not that they will stay fresh for very long. After all, this sunroom is her children's favorite place to rest most days, especially now that the chilly bite of winter is fast approaching.

Doris settles back against the arm on her side of the loveseat, picking up the needles from her lap and beginning to knit again. The acrylic yarn is rough, snarls of plastic fiber drifting off and snagging in her needles when her hands shake just so. She laments the days when she had hand-spun alpaca and angora yarns, in soft pinks and golds from dyes made by her neighbor Beverly. Beverly passed last winter, and the neighborhood still feels dead without her. She used to liven up the place with her hydrangeas and lilac trees. The hydrangeas are gone, but the lilac has flourished even without Bev's green thumb to help it along. The boughs of the tree lean against the rickety house's roof.

One of these days Doris will go over there and see if the old bat has any stashes she was hiding before she kicked the bucket. *I have lots of customers*, she used to say when Doris tried to buy more than five skeins at a time. *You gotta share with the rest of God's good creation. One woman cannot control the bounty.*

Bless her heart. Doris knows for certain she was her only consistent customer. Who would turn away someone like Doris, anyway? Everyone knows she knits a brand new sweater for each of her darlings every September. Most skeins she can get two or three sweaters out of, but some of the cats need a little more yarn in theirs — Seraphina's put on a few pounds lately, but it's really not her fault. Manxes have a bigger bone structure, is all.

One of the kittens lethargically bats at the ball of yarn as it canters back and forth. Doris glances down to see Phineas lying on his back, one paw outstretched for the yarn. Even he seems affected by the slowly fading light. She figures she might have another thirty or forty minutes of daylight before she'll have to pack up and make sure everyone's inside

the house. It's a lot harder to round up the children these days, what with her bad back and Will being a changed man and all. She hasn't seen him since June. She hopes he made it to the next town over, because she sure as Heck doesn't want to see him again, at least not 'til the Pearly Gates.

Every night she prays for his wandering soul to make sure that happens. She's not about to start some scandal in Heaven. Beverly can eat her hat before she can say that Doris Everworthy's husband is Downstairs partying with the Devil. The Bible says nothing about times like these. She's read it five times through, so she knows.

Will's a good man. A pious man. Never missed church once in their sixty years of marriage, always tithed even after retiring. He never really said much, but his actions spoke over his silence anyhow. He did the dishes on Sundays for Doris, raked the leaves in the front yard so the neighbors didn't talk. She forgave him for the backyard. Their fence was too high for the Shelleys to see on one side. The only one who could see over was Beverly, and everyone knew she was a gossip and half the time spun yarn lies. If anyone's going anywhere, it'd be her. All Doris ever wanted was to provide for her family. Beverly lived a life of envy and greed. Seven dollars a skein, toward the end. Seven dollars a skein unless Will would come over and fix up her kitchen sink. What a hussy, trying to steal Doris's god-fearing husband right from under her nose.

She wishes Beverly would've passed on before Will up and left, though. That old bag had too much satisfaction over his disappearance. It crossed a line.

Mr. Peabody creeps in through the cat door, something gripped tight in his teeth. He slinks past her, belly close the ground, like she won't notice he's trying to sneak something dead inside the house. He knows well enough that there are rules about this, but every day, it seems, he pretends to have forgotten.

"Peaboy, you stop right there," Doris says crossly. The black and white tom stops and lowers his head, looking about ready to run. Doris sets aside her needles. Three pairs of eyes stare at her from the loveseat, like a jury ready to convict. Even Phinny's stopped his feeble pawing and turns toward Mr. Peabody, eyes wide and green and unblinking. "Drop it."

The cat huffs a breath through his nose and deposits his kill on the floor, slow and gentle, like sudden movement might startle it. Another hand. This one is a mealy grey, the last joint on the pinky missing. The bone sticks out jagged, pointed up at the ceiling as it starts to drag itself forward, fingernails scraping on wood.

“I told you!” Doris shrieks, “No more bringin’ in hands! Tibbles eats ‘em every time and gets sick all over the comforter!”

Mr. Peabody sulks his way back out the cat door, tail flicking through last, flippant to the end. She stands and grabs for her broom, left in the sunroom just for this. It’s become routine. The hand reaches Phinny, who rolls again on his back and sticks out a curious batting paw. Doris swats the hand away with the broom. It flips over, three intact fingers flailing upward like a turtle stuck on its shell. She sweeps it toward the door, pauses to open it, then pushes it off the porch into the overgrowth of hedge.

“Try getting back in now,” she spits down at it, then closes the door and hobbles back toward her knitting.

The trio of cats on the loveseat all stand and croon for her attention. She pats each in turn: Reginald, pure white with one green eye, one blue; Felicity, who gets strokes along the black stripes of her cheeks; and Belladonna, whose ragamuffin rump shoots skyward as Doris scratches down her spine. “That’s right, babies,” she sings back to their chorus of trills. “No hands comin’ to get you tonight.”

She has to shoo them away to leave her enough room to sit back down, but they don’t mind. They settle at her feet, purring away contentedly. Phineas squeezes his way in and joins the happy cat mass.

Three more rows, five perl, thirty knit, five purl, before the sirens start.

The cats all startle, which is a shame really, given how many months this whole thing has lasted. She hopes they’ll get used to it soon, because their horrified little faces are just awful to bear. She’s not even certain there are actual people running the sirens anymore. Probably just one of those computer things set up to do it when the sun starts going down and the wanderers become active.

It started out as a neighborhood watch thing, but she thinks they've all skipped town, now. Nobody's stocking the grocery store, nobody's coming to church. It was one God-forsaken Sunday when Doris got herself over to Lamb and Savior and even Reverend Buckley neglected to show. She drove a careful twenty miles per hour back home and dug out her wedding Bible. She read psalms to her congregation of cats, all nestled together on the big floral couch in the den. One of the flaking kitchen chairs was her pulpit. Halfway through *Be still, and know that I am God*, she had to stop everything to drag Ruby Mae off the chair before she gnawed clean through a leg. Some of her cats, she swears, were put here by God Himself to test her temperance.

Most of them know the drill by now. Cats appear out of cupboards, couch cushions, nooks and crannies; the toms that prowl the neighborhood file in neat and tidy through the cat door, standing guard behind the rest as they move deeper into the house. Lights off, just a kerosene lamp lit in the bedroom to see by as her gaggle settles down for the night.

She takes her time undressing, stiff fingers struggling with the buttons on her cotton dress. Her nightgown slips easily over her head. The floor is too far down for her to kneel anymore, but she rests her thighs against her bed and bows her head. Gerome, Tobias, Delilah, and Philemon tuck their paws underneath them and squint their eyes shut. Doris likes to think they're praying with her.

"Lord, I have passed another day," she begins. She breathes in deep, savoring the Holy Grace she can feel upon her shoulders. "And come to thank Thee for Thy care. Forgive my faults in work and play, and listen to my evening prayer. Thy favor gives me daily bread, and friends, who all my wants supply, and safely now I rest my head, preserved and guarded by Thine eye."

A crash from the kitchen startles her before she can *amen*. The cats surrounding her spring to their feet, fur on end. Jacob creeps toward the door, peering into the darkness. Lorry-Beth flies into the closet.

"Must be Christopher again," Doris mutters, unclasping her hands and shuffling in slippered feet out the door. The darn cat constantly tries to get into the food tupperware

after she went to bed, as if she wouldn't immediately know who the culprit was come morning. "Christopher, you little sinner, get your Siamese butt over here!"

A rattling moan drifts from the room, much too low in timbre to be a cat. Doris stops. A furry body twines around her ankles; it's too dark to see who it is, but the purr sounds like Harrison.

"Hello?" she casts into the house more timidly, then hardens her voice and says, "This ain't a safe house. Get out before I shoot."

The sounds of chairs dragging slow on the linoleum floor reverberate through the flooring. Heavy footsteps head her direction. Something lands on her shoulder and she smothers a shriek into her hand — just Jacob, jumping from the hutch in the hallway.

Doris can see the figure now, a shuffling shadow in front of her. He's broad shouldered, with a pronounced limp, hands up like he's feeling his way through the darkness. Her heartbeat is a sparrow in her breast. "Stop," she commands, rooted to the floor. "Tell me who you are, or I mean it, I'll shoot." The only gun is Will's old hunting rifle, unloaded and locked in the hope chest at the foot of her bed.

"Uuhhhnnnn," the figure groans. The smell hits her hard, an acrid yet cloying stench, like roadkill left on the street for three days in the sun. With a trembling hand, Doris reaches for the hall light switch and flicks it on.

The man is greenish gray, pus oozing from scores of claw marks in his chest. A knife is lodged in his abdomen, *its* abdomen. Its bare feet streak black gore across the carpet.

"Dear Lord protect my soul and deliver me to Heaven," Doris forces out, voice nothing more than a rasp. On her shoulder, Jacob hisses a warning and then leaps, screeching, toward the monster. He lands full-bodied on its shoulder, claws tearing curls of flesh as he drags toward the floor.

Like the galloping of horses, hoards of cats flow around her, a writhing sea of spitting bodies. The thing is forced back, stumbling, unsteady on its undead feet. It collapses. The cats swarm over it, the sounds of tearing flesh reverberating in the hallway. She turns away so she doesn't have to see it, too.

Her cats are hungrier these days, left with the barest of rations so she can make sure they'll keep eating until she can find the next store with their brand still left behind by looters. It's harder keeping them fed than herself; her pantry's built for Kingdom Come, and she doesn't eat much lately. This is a treat for most of them. Wet food is a luxury they don't have anymore. She finds herself praying for Tibbles, that she won't decide to sleep in the bed tonight. She has to walk a mile over to the Blackman's well to do laundry now that the water's been shut off.

She doesn't watch, but she can imagine: Seraphina crouched by the gut, tearing into fat and unworked muscle. Ruby Mae working at the ankles, like she does on living people too. Delilah nibbling at a forearm, maybe, before deciding she'd rather have some throat, and pushing little Felicity from her collarbone perch. Phineas, crouched like a vulture until the others have had their fill, waiting to snatch up all the leftovers.

Trilling, pleased voices drift up to her as they disperse, some rubbing their gut-covered heads on her bare ankles, others pausing to clean themselves up before offering their love and praises. She pats them half-heartedly, staring down at the torn-up body. Something about it is familiar; those patched jeans, that color hair, the crooked bottom teeth. Doris turns away and swallows down her tears. She will not cry. It's not a man anymore. What made it a man is long gone.

Mr. Peabody trots past her with a hand clutched carefully in his mouth. On one finger a simple gold wedding band glints. She lets him carry it off.

"Lord," she says wearily toward the ceiling, "Please promise to take him home."

Remedios Varo's *Weaving of Space and Time*, 1954

Kara Wright

The light of my candle
cocoons the room. The glass
of poison waits at the table.
I've returned once more,
woven back into spatial seams.

I no longer look to see
if he'll appear at the door.
I no longer ignore
the spectral strings
that fill my vision—the pulls
of minutes, loose threads
unraveling from the candlelight
and the crooked chairs, from my breath—
all recede, unweave, and is rewound.

As always, I am joined
by Blackbird. She enters
through the kitchen window,
to which an outside must exist.
I think this
but do not bring myself to ask.

It hurts less to pretend
that I've always been here.

Blackbird perches along
the head of a chair.
He is there, she whispers.

Yes, I'm well aware.

There are threads
hanging between us.
Repetitious patterns
are difficult to untangle.

This time he holds a flower.

It's wilted, pale as his face.
Even now time reverberates
from its petals,
an ache that echoes through
our mutual silence.

Again, Blackbird will watch:
 the poison cascade my lips
 or him at my neck, wringing air
 or the flame eating the floor
 that will reset, reform,
 the wheels of our fate.

Exoplanet Six: The Nouveau Riche

Taylor Walker

“I think I lost your sunglasses,” he said, like it was no big deal. Like I wasn’t literally starving to death.

“Caaate,” I whined, realizing that I was sounding petulant and annoying in front of Gellar but unable to help myself. “If I don’t go outside in like six seconds I swear I’m gonna die.” I will concede the point I’m sure you could totally make: no, nobody can die from lack of sun exposure, not for a few days at least. At the worst end, I’d probably only suffer minor cell death. But I was still pretty pissed that Cate had lost them. They were *Chanel*.

“You can borrow mine; stop being ridiculous.” She tossed me this gaudy looking plastic pair—all kiddy-rose and cracked polycarbonate at the edges, definitely not something you’d see on the runways at Milan 2.0.

Gellar smiled and stretched his right arm over my shoulders, and we were so close I could smell his aftershave: petrichor and diamond crush. Was there anything sexier? I glanced down at my arms, suddenly uncomfortable: the scaly juniper-green implants were still a bit sore from when I’d had the chloroplasts replaced last weekend. I picked at the squishy vacuole self-consciously. Mine were bigger than everyone else’s, and the boys always stared.

“Lydia,” he said to me, his voice clear and bright like New London skies. “I think they look cute.”

I blushed. I wondered what would happen if I wrapped my legs around him and kissed the hell out of him.

Cate was only fourteen so she didn’t know the strange and wonderful things a girl could do with a boy she liked. All she knew about was biodynamics, integral calculus and ancient birdcalls—she liked to listen to recordings of them on ridic old-fashioned music players, which were sort of like z-pads except way clunkier. Cate was kind of a weirdo, but she was my cousin, so I made everyone else put up with her.

“Hello, can we please go now?” she said, craning her neck towards the sprocket-hole windows of our Faraday cage of a high school. Tesla would’ve been proud of us.

“Well yeah, we’d have been in the cafeteria already if you hadn’t held us all up.” Gellar squeezed my shoulder and then stood up, slinging his backpack into the radiation bin. I put my purse there too but I sort of hid it with my sweater, because it was real plant leather and I wasn’t about to have my nicest bag stolen. Cate grabbed my hand and pulled me towards the exit, a massive lug of a door which was sealed shut and needed a passcode to open it. This was a legal thing, I guess, since the school would get majorly sued should any of the babygardeners wander out into the sunlight and flood their systems with ATP. The little kids were still getting used to watching the chlorophyll patches dance just under their skin, and they wouldn’t really need the sun until they were older, which is when the skin transplant happens for most people. Not me and Cate though. Our great grandfather pioneered the process—Human Biogenic Chlorofication™, he called it—and it was pretty rad. “Save New Earth” or whatever. The hippies loved us for doing away with meat farms.

The passcode, by the way, was Edgar Allan Poe. Our headmistress was sort of obsessed with primeval literature. The door opened with a click, which I’d always thought was sort of anticlimactic, and we three headed out into the yard. The sun was lemon-bright and fell in waves on the grass. A couple of people were hanging around, soaking it up, making the obligatory tanning jokes. I launched into my eternal spiel: we should totally have something portable, like sun lamps or something, right?

I slid my shirt off, sleeve by sleeve, revealing an ivory lace camisole I’d chosen because it contrasts beautifully with the emerald sheen of the new epidermis cells on my wrist. I could see Gellar looking at me from the corner of my eye, but I didn’t acknowledge it. Drink it in, pretty boy! This is the cellular efficiency money can buy.

Gellar was pretty rich too, lest you think I was mentally hassling some pov0 from the inner city or something. No, he could afford as many HBC™ phytotransplants as he wanted, but he’d never been one for the deluxe package.

He turned to me, suddenly, and it was like I had tunnel vision. So. Hot. (The dude, not the sun, although the latter was pretty hot too and my guard stomata were starting to cut off transpiration.) He grinned and his dimples appeared. “Lyds, I have something to ask

you.” *Will you marry me?* Yes. Hell yes. (But I nodded.) “Will you have dinner with me tonight?”

I was, frankly, startled. “But we’re eating right now,” I spluttered, gesturing to the chloroplasts on both of our arms, which were frantically photosynthesizing like they did every day at suntime. Gellar’s family was “traditional”... like they still had normal-sized digestive systems and had a sit-down family dinner every Sunday, that sort of thing. I’d thought it was cute when he first told me, a couple years ago. Him with his little meatloaf or whatever. But thinking something is adorably retro and actually *doing* it are two very different things.

“Yeah,” he laughed, sounding maybe more deflated than when he’d first asked. “But that’s not really eating, you know?” Then, like it had suddenly occurred to him, he lowered his voice to a whisper and asked, “You... still have a stomach, right?”

I felt a pink flush cross my face. This was so embarrassing. To be asked, at school, if I had *digestive organs*? I yanked my hand away from his, hot tears threatening. I could see people start to turn. They were looking.

Laughing?

I ran out of the cafeteria, still hungry but willing to wait till tomorrow—and besides I was dehydrated anyway. I walked briskly into the bathroom and slammed the first stall door shut with me inside. I snapped open my AquaPort and tubed-in some mineral water that I’d brought with me that day. Sniffing, I brought a hand to my eyes—kohl smeared everywhere. Now I was a crazy rich girl *and* a train wreck.

The door to the bathroom swung open quietly, and I knew who it was. “Go away, Cate,” I said, my voice cracking a bit in the middle and really ruining my image of a steely, broken woman who has to forge a new life for herself.

“Come on, babe,” Cate said, leaning against the bathroom sink. She brushed the ash-blond hair out of her eyes. “It’s not that bad. Lots of people are like us.” Silence. She continued: “Sally Zleitzfeld doesn’t even have lungs.”

“W-what? What do you mean?” Because gossip can always draw a girl out of herself.

“I mean she doesn’t have lungs. They’re fake. She has polymesh inside her chest cavity with a little pump that makes it look like she’s breathing, but she’s not.”

A laugh bubbled from my throat. “But she was always making fun of me for being so breathless after we ran in gym!” I pushed open the door and glanced in the mirror. Makeup: salvageable.

“I think people always want what they don’t have,” Cate said, shrugging her shoulders. She held my purse in an outstretched hand. (What a kid. She takes after me.)

“Yeah, yeah,” I muttered, applying a fresh coat of Ruby Plume No. 5. Opaque lips are very in right now.

“Lydia, I think you should go anyway.” She pursed her lips, and continued. “Gellar’s family will understand. They’re probably like the only ones left who do that, anyway. I think you should go.” She pushed open the bathroom door, gripping my hand in hers.

“And I think dinner should be outside.”

CryptoZoo IV

JD Donnelly

Previously on CryptoZoo, as seen in The Cyborg Griffn Vol. 2-4: Cleo the chupacabra is the adopted daughter of Aristotle, the immortal fore-father of sasquatches, and mutual drinking buddy of JD, the Jersey Devil. When Aristotle's disappearance threatens the existence of sasquatches—and all of cryptid kind—JD and Cleo team up to search for him, “in the lands of man” as the Mothman prophesized. Cleo learns the ins and outs of magical disguises, but when she dons the painted face from a woman's portrait in JD's Manhattan apartment, the Jersey Devil is less than pleased.

Identity: the condition of being oneself or itself, and not another. Insert your favorite sappy movie quote about being “true to your heart” or “be yourself” here. I'm going to go with my personal favorite, “With great power comes great responsibility”.

“Take off that glamour—NOW!”

“W-what?” I stammered.

“I said remove that glamour!” JD shouted again. I shied back against the glass, the pane chilling my back while JD's rage burned in front of me. He was just as fearsome as when he'd confronted the other immortids at the council, though he didn't have the claws to brandish.¹ His unexpected reaction startled me out of the woman's skin; with a tingling wave of transformation and fright I shrunk back to my spikey chupacabra self, like slipping out of a loafer suddenly five sizes too big.

“Cleo you do not put on another person's face as a glamour!” JD snarled.

“I'm sorry, I—”

“It's exceedingly dangerous! Unless you know every last detail of the person you run the risk of exposing yourself!” JD's eyes narrowed to dangerous slits. “Do you know this woman's name? Where she lived? Where she was born? Her age? Her profession? Her native language?”

¹ On a scale of 1 to 10, he ranked, “Uber-pissed-off”.

I hung my head guilty. “N-no—”

“Can you tell me her favorite song, her favorite food, her dreams, her aspirations? Her sorrows? Her regrets? Her fears?”

“No.” I chewed my lip.

“Can you tell me the names of her family?” he snapped.

I shook my head, blinking back tears. “No.”

I’m not sure if it was the whimper in my voice or that I huddled at his feet with my tail between my legs that defused his fury. JD frowned, his rage ebbing away and replaced by solemnity.

He huffed, gesturing to his human body head to toe. “I do not wear a stranger’s skin, Cleo. I do not pretend to be someone else—I am Lucas Leeds.” He shook his head, muttering something as he sank down on the couch. He cupped his head in one palm while clasping his wounded side with a grimace.

I cautiously crept from the window and approached him, considering it a promising sign when he didn’t get up and yell at me again. I rested my chin on his knee.² “I’m sorry, JD. I didn’t think about all that. I just wanted to try putting on a human glamour, you know, so we could start looking for Papa sooner. I figured it would be easier if I was human rather than a dog. I was having trouble so I looked at that lady’s portrait for reference. I promise I won’t do it again.”

He was silent for a moment. “I know you didn’t know, and I am at fault for not telling you sooner. You actually have some really good logic when you utilize it, Cleo. I’m sorry for yelling at you,” he apologized with a shrug. “It was... You startled me, is all. I didn’t think you’d manage to pull off a human glamour so soon.”

I flicked my ears curiously. “Who was she?”

JD glanced down at my question before his gaze fell back on the unsmiling woman’s portrait. “She’s gone. Long, long gone.”

There was such despondency in his voice I sensed it would be better not to poke my nose further.

² This was a tried and true tactic I used on Papa when I got into mischief as a pup to sneak out of a grounding.

“The next time you try putting on a human glamour, just be yourself,” JD continued.

I raised my brow dubiously. “So, be myself while I pretend to be an entirely different species?”

“I mean you should tailor your human glamour to how you would see yourself as human, then let your own personality shine through. Should the occasion arise, it will be far easier and more beneficial in the long run to gloss over or modify details of your personal history rather than memorize a stranger’s.” He puffed a strand of his hair from his eyes.

“Trust me, I know from experience.”

“Okay.” I nodded in understanding. Already my mind was frolicking at what kind of girl I would be—what kind of girl I wanted to be.

My stomach decided to join the conversation with a pathetic squeal as loud as a herd of screaming mice. JD frowned at me. “Cleo, when was the last time you ate anything?”

“Well, I caught a rabbit two days before going to the Hutch,” I answered as I thought back to my last blood meal.³ In the last thirty-six-some hours my hunger had been dampened by excitement, fear, and a cocktail of the two. I guess glamourizing burned extra calories or something, because now that I was settled down I could practically feel my stomach eating itself. I was thirsty enough to drink an elephant whole till all I was left with was a giant, elephant-shaped raisin.

“You know, that was probably the underlying reason you were having trouble putting on a human glamour to begin with.” JD nodded knowingly. “It is hard to concentrate on an empty stomach. Shall I fetch some dinner?”

One minute. That’s how long it takes once the jugular is punctured.

I had to wait over an hour for JD to come back from his outing, though. I had asked to come along, but he’d stopped me, saying that it would be better “for my condition” to

³ To an average, predatory chupacabra like myself, the size of the prey determines the amount of blood we drink and how long we are satisfied to our next meal. Something the size of a rabbit or a chicken could tide me for a day or two, while goats last me a solid week. Anything larger than that and I either need to share it or know when to stop. I remember one time this chupacabra I know, Sandra, managed to sneak into a chicken coup and drank so many chickens she had plumped up like a tick. She had to wait hours to digest enough before she could wriggle her fat butt out the hole she’d made in the wire. Fortunately she managed to slip out before the chicken farmers woke up.

remain and rest. The only thing helping to numb my ravenous hunger was the fact that he'd turn on the TV and left me the remote. Let me tell you, going from static cable to HD satellite was a spoiling experience.⁴ So I sat curled up on the leather couch, flicking through the army of channels with a well-placed paw, entranced by the vibrant colors dancing before my eyes. My attention finally caught on some fantasy movie about a pissed-off princess turning a spoiled dragon into a slave boy or something. It was one I hadn't seen before and I joined halfway through.

My ears pricked up to his returning footsteps even before the front door opened and JD shuffled in. He'd changed out of his business attire in favor of a more casual polo shirt and khakis⁵ for his stint on the town. While a collection of plastic shopping bags were bundled under his right arm, an animal carrier was tucked under his left. Because of his rules, I didn't approach JD till he had closed the door behind him and set the other bags down.

"Where did you go? What did you get?" I asked, unapologetically wagging my tail. I could smell and hear the dog scrabbling inside the carrier before he answered, though.

"It's a mutt that was slated to be euthanized tomorrow," JD said.

"Huh, well, better he be my dinner than a waste," I reasoned.

JD then crouched down and looked me dead in the eye. "Now, Cleo, I am only doing this because of our current circumstances and your lack of practice with glamour. Humans keep record of animal adoptions and purchases, so I cannot go out and just pick up cats and dogs for you without drawing suspicion. Do you understand?"

"But then what am I going to do for food?" I asked. My tongue watered at the prey before my nose. "Can't I just go out and hunt some stray cats or something? Why didn't you catch a stray?"

"I don't want you wandering around Manhattan by yourself, let alone hunting without a glamour on. And I may be the Jersey Devil, but I can't chase down a stray while sporting Armani, let alone without catching someone's attention. This is a city, after all, not the backwoods. I know it may become difficult to appease the instincts for a natural hunt—I

⁴ It was like transcending to a whole new level of visual enlightenment.

⁵ Both of them dark brown/black. *Geeze*, he was kind of unoriginal in his fashion colors.

make it a point myself to return periodically to the Pine Barrens to catch a meal with my own claws. However, rest assured you will not starve. Once you master putting on a human metamorphic glamour, you will be able to eat like one.”

“Eat, like, all the meat?” I tilted my head curiously at the possibility.⁶

“And more. You’d be surprised what kind of recipes humans have managed to cook up.” The dog yipped inside the carrier and JD sighed, returning to the business at hand.

“But, for now, you can take your meal in the bathroom. It will be easier to clean up on tile than anywhere else.”

So JD led me to my porcelain dining quarters. All the smooth surfaces, from the clean-cut mirrors and glass shower walls to the metal sink, gleamed like sheets of pointed light. JD set the carrier down in the large bathtub and clicked the cage door open.

“Enjoy. Try not to break anything, please, and you can use the towel on the rack to clean up if you need to,” he told me before excusing himself, sealing the door behind him so neither the dog nor the carnage could escape.

I peered over the edge of the bathtub and saw it was a bug-eyed, spastic little thing slightly smaller than I was. Sadly, it was so scruffy and so old I could kind of see why humans had overlooked it as an ideal pet. It started trembling and whimpering once it saw me, the empty bathroom ringing as it tinkled in the tub.

It was literally like shooting fish in a barrel.⁷ It takes a minute, depending on the size of the body, for the life to drain away once the jugular is pierced by a fang keen enough to slice through skin, muscle and bone. But I try to be considerate; I usually bite down with extra force and crunch the vertebrae like piñata candy. It’s silent, it’s quick, there is no struggle, and it’s merciful.⁸

Once I’d sucked the dog dry I lapped up all the blood that had spilled in the tub⁹, relishing every last drop of crimson. While I licked the last specks of blood from between

⁶ We chupacabras almost never, ever eat the solid tissues/organs/bones of our prey. Our teeth and stomachs can’t handle it since we are normally on a pure liquid diet. I’ve always secretly wanted to try some. Chicken, turkey, beef pork, snake—the *other* other white meat, or so I’ve heard.

⁷ Or in this case, pouncing on a dog in a bathtub.

⁸ Well, *relatively* merciful.

⁹ Except where the dog had peed. Chupacabras *do not* drink *that*!

my paw pads my mind trailed back to my very first hunt. Once I was old enough, Papa had taken me from the Hutch to one of the farms some ways down the mountains. We went, night after night, him lifting me over the fence into the goat pen with his mile-long arms. He leaned on the fence, standing guard as he guided me, throwing out what directions the cloven-hoofed meals were zig-zagging. It took me a couple of tries, but when I finally managed to take down a lagging member of the herd and nursed down my first taste of blood, Papa had watched proudly.¹⁰ Afterward when we returned to the Hutch he let me pick the book we read that night—and I'd picked a re-reading of Jurassic Park—to celebrate my first successful kill.

I hoisted myself out of the bathtub and paced around, my claws clicking like typewriter teeth on the black-and-white patterned tile. I caught my reflection in the mirror again; a small, hairless, now slightly bloated chupacabra. I sighed and shimmied up, facing down my reflection. I thought about what JD advised, about being who I was in a different form. I closed my eyes and concentrated on the Mothman feather again.

I remembered napping on Papa's warm lap in the summer sun, imagined the brave heroes saving the trapped princesses in all the old books he used to read, and visualized the woman in the portrait and all the people I'd seen so far. I thought about the human shape, and how it was different from tail to snout, and imagined all that I had shifting and rearranging.

Glamourizing after a full meal was much easier than before, though it did make me slightly nauseous as all the blood sloshed around in my reorienting stomach. When I felt myself settle into my taller shape I opened my eyes. A younger woman than the colonial beauty stared back at me in the mirror. Now my skin was sun-kissed brown by the desert sun, and my human eyes were the same shade of sandy brown they had always been. I admittedly did miss the long, blonde hair; I guess to compensate for my natural hairless-ness, I was granted a dark-brown pixie cut. I didn't have the curvaceous, child-bearing proportions as earlier, but I did have a healthy layer of muscle. A small slit for my pouch still rested under my belly-button. I reached out my hand and touched the mirror, testing that the

¹⁰ Papa normally ate berries and nuts and other kinds of green things himself, but he'd occasionally eat a squirrel or two. Everyone, especially primates, needs their essential proteins.

reflection was genuine and it didn't distort or ripple away from my fingertips. I was a real human girl.¹¹ I smirked at my new self, exposing a pair of eye-teeth slightly too long.¹²

On tentative footsteps, I walked over to the bathroom door and let myself out.¹³ JD was sitting and watching the TV, shopping bags strewn about him on the couch. He nibbled on a steak from a take-out box, a glass of his favorite inky wine on the table before him. He'd changed the channel to some kind of news program.

"Introducing Cleo the human!" I proclaimed.

JD turned in surprise. "Geeze, Cleo! Do I need to put a bell on you?"

He paused, giving me the once over. He finally nodded. "Better. It is much more suiting. Though you are lacking some details."

"Details? What details?" I asked, not expecting his immediate critiquing.¹⁴

He stared poignantly at my chest. "Most human women aren't as featureless as a Barbie doll."

I huffed indignantly and crossed my arms over my pancake-flat breasts. "My nipples are in my pouch, you perv. You said yourself my pouch is my feature I can't change in glamour."

JD reached over and lifted one of the bags to me. "All right, touché. Though you're going to have to be extra careful to cover such a discrepancy. Here, I picked these up for the time being, but we might have to get you some more. You're skinnier than I anticipated."

"What happened to Mr. 'But I'm usually naked?'"

"And what happened to Miss 'humans aren't normally naked?'" he retorted.

"Nipples or no, you certainly won't get far down the block if you're not wearing anything, smart ass." He turned back to the TV to grant me some 'modesty.'

In juvenile fashion I stuck out my tongue at the back of his head rather than admit he was right.¹⁵ I ruffled through the bag and pulled out an extra-large cotton t-shirt. "Are

¹¹ Take that, Pinocchio!

¹² Well, we can't all be perfect.

¹³ JD gathered up the remaining dog body in the morning. I didn't have the nerve to ask how exactly he disposed of it, though. Normally I just leave my corpses to turn to compost.

¹⁴ You think I'd get extra credit for managing to pull a second human glamour in one night!

¹⁵ I'm starting to lose track of the one-up tally, but I think I was losing. Horribly.

you kidding me! JD, could you be any tackier?” I held up the “I ♥NY” t-shirt like a garish flag.

He glanced over his shoulder and smirked. “What? I thought you’d appreciate the souvenir of your first time venturing into the lands of man.”

I rolled my eyes at him and slipped the shirt on, fashioning myself a night gown. In a move less graceful than I intended,¹⁶ I hopped over the couch and landed cross-legged beside him. A new wave of tiredness flowed over me and I rubbed the heel of my palms over my eyes. “You know, after all this glamourizing and humans and being shot at and whatnot, I could really use a White Russian to get rid of the knot in my nerves.”

“No,” JD said flatly. At first I thought he meant “No, I don’t have the ingredients”, but then he took a sip of his wine and set it down with finality. “We need to set some ground rules to being human. First, you are not allowed to drink a drop of alcohol.”

“What! Why are you being a stingy devil?”

“I’m not being stingy—I’m being practical,” JD scowled at me. “If I get drunk off my tail I *can’t* slip into my cryptid form by accident. If you get tipsy, Cleo, you could be sprouting paws and spines in the middle of the conversation. Maintaining a glamour is difficult enough as it is, and you wish to compound it with drunkenness?”

“No,” I grumbled at his killjoy point. I admittedly could feel the chupacabra me resting in the back of my mind—and if I didn’t keep one metaphorical eye on her, she was just waiting to rush forward and shove the human skin from my bones. Now that was something I definitely had to be wary of.¹⁷

“Second, you are not allowed to leave this apartment on your own.”

“What are you, my mama? You want to hold my hand too?”

“Do you want to get mugged or worse? Humans have been known to do very cruel things to each other, especially young, pretty girls. I see it every damn day in the papers and on the news.” He frowned as the newscaster droned on in the background.

¹⁶ I wasn’t quite accustomed to my human dimensions, so I sort-of flopped like a salmon.

¹⁷ I’m sure it would count as some kind of wardrobe malfunction or something.

“I think I can fend for myself. I’ve been living in my own territory for years now,” I assured.

“But you don’t have claws and fangs anymore,” he pointed out. “Would you drop your glamour and risk exposing yourself so plainly to humans—which, by the way, are three times your size under normal conditions, if you hadn’t observed.”

“Okay, I see your point.”

“Therefore, unless you are escorted by me, you will remain sheltered here.” JD chewed another bite of his steak. “Besides, you will still most likely slip back into a chupacabra as you sleep, so you can only rest here.”

I snorted. “You better free up your schedule for some large search blocks, then. When are we going to start looking for Aristotle?”

“Soon enough.”

“JD! We haven’t done anything yet! We napped, ate, and played with glammers. That’s not much progress!”

“You volunteered to commence the search when no others even spoke up. And I seriously doubt any typical cryptid suddenly endowed with the power of glamour would have accomplished as much as you in such a short time, nor, setting aside certain unforeseen obstacles, have even braved to enter this deep into man’s lands without a second thought. On the contrary, I think Aristotle himself would be proud of your progress,” JD said as he sipped his wine. “After all, he was the best teacher I had, so in a round-about way you’re learning from him.”

“Wait, Papa taught you how to put on glammers?” I snapped to attention at this sudden detail. “He pretended to be human?”

“Very rarely,” JD answered. He pointed to one of the photos on the wall. “That’s him, there.”

I stood up and reexamined the glossy polaroid. In it was JD, sopping wet as if he’d just gotten out of the ocean, with a strange man in Ray Bans, a vibrant floral-print shirt and matching swim trunks. They stood on a boat in front of some stretch of tropical beach. Though he was significantly less hairy than a typical sasquatch, the tan man sported a shaggy

beard and hippy-liked ponytail the same reddish color as his fur. I didn't notice it the first time, but his smile was definitely Papa's.

"He prefers not to. Sometimes he'll glamour as human to venture into man's lands at the Mothman's behest, though he doesn't tell me much about those trips. I had to badger him for thirty years to join me on that trip to the Keys. When I was a younger Devil and had not yet grasped the art of glamour, he taught me all that he knew, one immortal to another. He was the one who helped me map out my limitations as well, especially the particulars of sunrise and sunset." JD paused in his explanation when he saw my expression. "What's wrong?"

"He never told me. At all." I shook my head, my mind still not accepting the burly, beaming man in the portrait as my Papa.

JD considered me and the portrait of our lost, disguised sasquatch. His expression grew sympathetic, his normally sharp features softening. "Cleo, he was just looking out for you. He wanted you to live a normal cryptid life away from the burdens of the immortids and hazards of people."

"Well, it's a little late at this point, don't you think?"

"I doubt he intended to disappear to wherever he's gone," JD remarked. "You can ask him yourself when we find him."

I gritted my teeth against the frustrations burrowing deep into my gut. It was bad enough that JD tells me jack-squat, but Papa? I never knew he had a double—wait, triple¹⁸—life that he never bothered to tell me more about. I knew he'd disappear for long wandering stints, I just never suspected he would ever travel as a human rather than as the sasquatch I had grown up with. I crossed my arms over my chest as a chill crept into my nerves. I stared at the picture of the two strange men, trying to swallow the distaste in the back of my throat.

At least, I continued to look at the candid vacation shot before the power went out.

When the apartment plunged into darkness and the TV sizzled silent I exclaimed, "What the hell!" I turned and looked out the window, but the rest of Manhattan's skyline

¹⁸ For those of you keeping track at home: 1. Sasquatch 2. Immortid privy to "Man's Broken Promise" 3. Vacationer in Ray Bans.

still sparkled brightly. JD's eyes gleamed red in the half-light as he stood up, tensely surveying our conundrum.

Suddenly a familiarly raspy voice crackled through the dead TV speakers, and for a heartbeat I saw glowing red eyes flash in the plasma screen. "Beware the children of the first book and the cryptid eyes they have blinded."

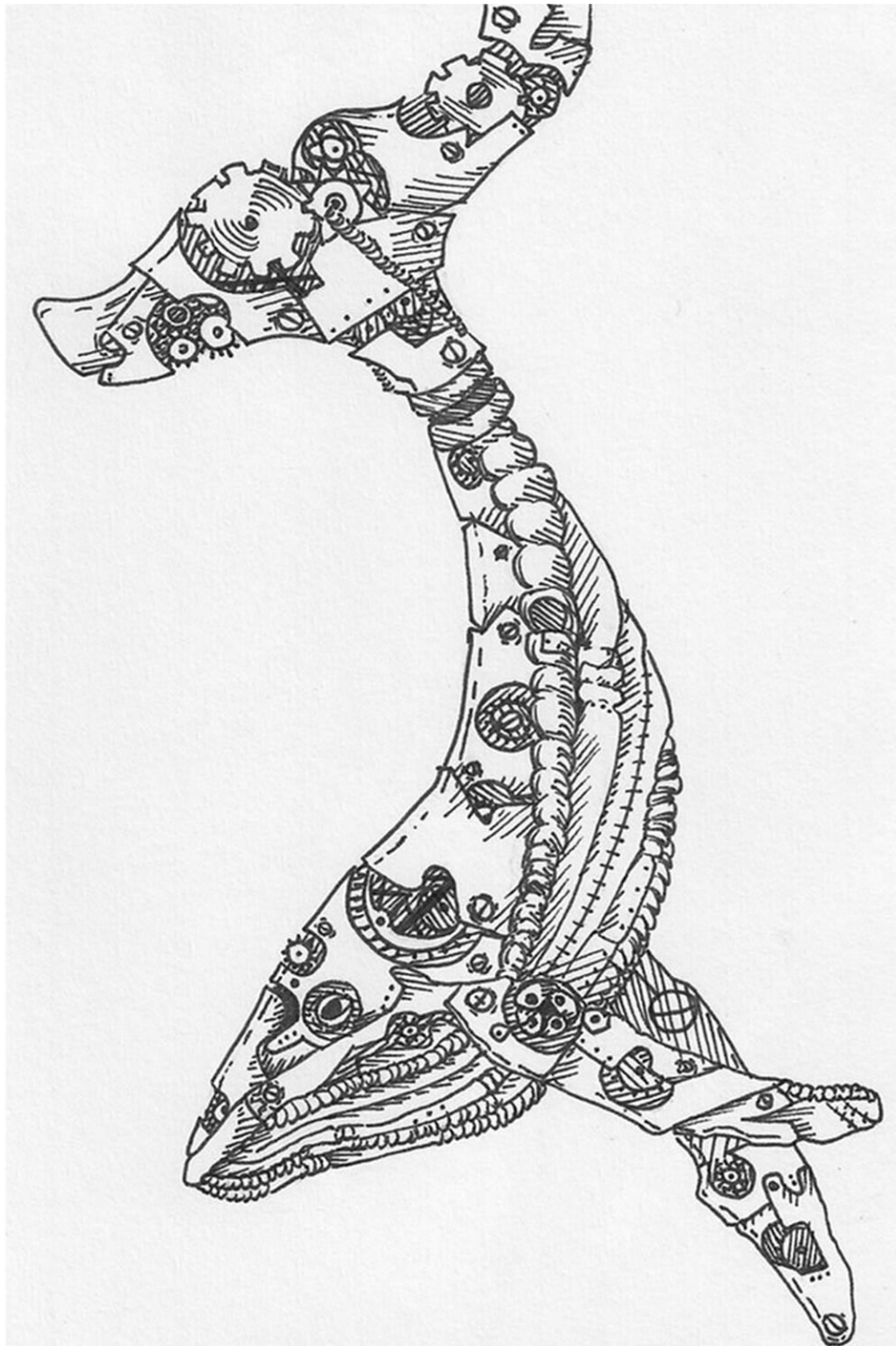
"Mothman! Wait!" JD shouted. But before he even finished calling the immortal's name, electricity charged back into everything and the lights and TV flickered on. JD and I stared at screen, but all traces of the red eyes were gone, replaced by footage of a burning apartment building.

JD cursed under his breath. "Dammit! Do you know how difficult it is to catch the Mothman's attention when you actually need to talk to him? I called him earlier to inform him of our incident with the helicopter and our current situation, but I had to leave a voicemail."

"What the—how the hell do you leave a voicemail for the frick'n Mothman? He doesn't even have hands to operate a phone!"

"He doesn't leave the Source as often as he used to since he's had to deal with growing cryptid concerns, so he psychically taps into the electrical and sound waves in human technology to reach us out here. To call him you punch out 'Point Pleasants' on a number pad, and it works regardless of the cell signal." JD frowned, already pondering the words that had been flung at us. He shrugged. "At least he had the courtesy to respond at all, though his vague nature pisses me off half the time. I swear, Aristotle is one of the only ones with enough patience to hold a conversation with him."

I blinked at JD. "Wait, did we just get a drive-by prophecy?"



Steampunk Whale Kate Lydon

Fractured, Not Broken

Michelle Mangano

Ellie had been told that the Tampa chapter of the Fractured Fairy Tale Support Group was popular, but she certainly hadn't expected it to be so crowded. After getting a cup of lemonade and loading up her plate with lettuce and chocolate chip cookies at the snack table, she looked around at the circle of chairs set up in the center of the room, trying to find a free seat. The majority were taken by humans, talking animals, and people of other fantastical nature. Spotting an empty chair, she quickly made her way over to it. After she sat down, she smoothed out the wrinkles in her sea-green dress and patted down her curly brown hair, making sure she looked presentable. Once she was settled, she smiled to her neighbors. To her left, the quad amputee in the tri-corner hat and navy uniform nodded politely. The little girl on her other side just stared at her. Instead of returning Ellie's grin, the girl tightened her grip on a half-eaten lollipop.

Across the circle, an older man with kind face and a short gray beard stood up and cleared his throat. The chatter ceased and everyone turned to look at him.

"Let's get started, everyone," he said. "I see a couple of new faces here, so I'll just give a quick run-down on what the group is about. After that, the officers will go ahead and introduce themselves.

"For those of you just joining us, this is the Fractured Fairy Tale Support Group. If you're looking for the Double Double Toil and Trouble Brewing Club, they're holding their meeting down the hall. If you want to pop back in and share some drinks when you're done, though, we wouldn't mind." His smile broadened as polite laughter rang out around the circle. "I'm Fairy Godfather. I founded this particular group a few years ago with the other officers due to the rising number of fairy folk who have become discontent with the outcomes of their tales in this area. After experiencing my own trials with being in a female dominated work environment, I wanted to create a safe space where anyone can feel free to express and come to terms with the twists and turns of our lives. Even if it isn't the most magical, we all deserve our happy endings."

Ellie joined with the others in applauding the Fairy Godfather's speech. With another smile, he sat back down in his chair.

A young boy with multiple piercings and wearing a black band t-shirt spoke next. "My name is Pinocchio," he chirped, brushing back his black and blue bangs. "I'm the vice chair. I helped Godfather establish this group in order to come to terms with my immortal boyhood. I cope by exploring alternative ways to express myself." He flashed a peace sign at the Fairy Godfather, who returned the gesture with a thumb's up.

Finally, a unicorn with a rainbow mane and kneeling at the other end of the circle bowed its head. "I'm Shimmer," the unicorn said in a gravelly voice. "I'm the secretary. I'm trying to stop smoking and confront my inner demons."

"Well then." Fairy Godfather clapped his hands together. "Now that intros are out of the way, do we have any good news?"

The little girl beside Ellie stood up. She held up the half-eaten lollipop. "I've decided to give up candy in honor of my brother, Hansel," she announced. "After he was killed by a runaway ice cream truck, I thought that drowning my sorrows with sweets would help me forget my survivor's guilt. You guys have helped me learn that behaving that way only causes me more pain. And cavities." She straightened out her arm, the white stick level with her eye. "This is for you, bro." She let the lollipop go.

The candy plummeted to the tile floor, shattering upon impact. Ellie watched as girl stomped on the pastel colored remains. The lollipop's demise met with applause, wolf-whistles, and shouts of encouragement from the circle. Ellie didn't say anything.

After thoroughly crushing the candy into powder, Gretel sat down. She stared down at the floor, her face gray. She sniffled and wiped the corners of her eyes.

"Well done, Gretel," Fairy Godfather said, smiling. "You've made excellent progress since you've been here."

Gretel just nodded.

Fairy Godfather looked out to the rest of the circle. "Does anyone else have anything?" He paused for a moment before continuing. "No? Okay, then we'll move onto

new stories.” He glanced around the circle of chairs before pointing at Ellie. “How about you, young lady?”

Ellie started and glanced up at the Fairy Godfather. “Me?”

Fairy Godfather nodded.

Setting down her plate, Ellie cleared her throat. “Um...hi,” she squeaked, giving a shy wave. “My name is Ellie.”

“Hi, Ellie,” the room responded as one.

Her round brown cheeks lit up with a pink blush. She tucked a stray curl behind her ear before continuing. “I’m here...well, I’m here because my mama wanted me to come. But I —” She paused, biting her lip. “I don’t know if I should be here.”

“Why not?” Shimmer asked.

Ellie shrugged. “I don’t think I need any help.”

Some members of the circle shook their heads or made indignant sounds. Fairy Godfather held up his hand. “Hold on now, folks. Remember rule five; don’t judge. I’m sure Ellie has reasons for her doubt. Besides, we all know how hard it is to come here in the first place, even when you were sure that something was wrong.”

A murmur of agreement went around the circle. When the comments died down again, Fairy Godfather spoke. “Why don’t you start from the beginning, dear? Did you recently have a life-changing event?”

She looked up at the ceiling for a moment, as if such a thing was hard to recall. “Oh!” Ellie looked back at Fairy Godfather, a bright smile on her sun freckled face. “I used to be a manatee!”

Fairy Godfather blinked. “A...manatee?”

“Mhm!” She nodded. “A West Indian manatee.”

“I see. And how did a manatee become...” He gestured to her figure. “A girl?”

The blush in Ellie’s cheeks deepened. “Because of a water-hose,”

“How so?” Pinocchio chimed in, leaning forward in interest.

“Manatees really like fresh water, so if someone living near the water leaves their hose on, a manatee can follow it,” Ellie explained. “I followed a trail of fresh water one day and when I came up out of the surface, there was a boy holding a hose.”

As she continued, her hands intertwined in her lap. “I shouldn’t say boy, he was pretty...tall. And he was really...really...” Her voice dropped to a low murmur. “Handsome.”

“Ellie?” Fairy Godfather asked. “May I ask you a personal question?”

She nodded.

“Were you in love with this boy?”

Keeping her focus on her hands, the manatee girl nodded again.

Several cries of “Awww!” rang out in the circle, only causing the girl to hide her face behind her hands.

“No need to be shy, honey,” Shimmer grunted. “Fairy folk tend to fall in love with mortals. Having that feeling for a non-magical being isn’t wrong.”

Ellie’s fingers parted, showing her dewy brown eyes. “I’m not embarrassed about that. I didn’t really care that he was mortal.”

“Why are you embarrassed, then?” Shimmer prodded.

“Well...I’ve never felt that way about anyone,” she said. “I never liked any of the boy manatees in the ocean. Besides, feelings can be difficult to talk about, right?”

The unicorn nodded knowingly, nearly gouging the tile floor with its two foot spiral horn.

“Is that why you turned into a girl?” Pinocchio asked. “What happened with you two? Did you...you know...” He raised his pierced eyebrows in a suggestive manner.

Fairy Godfather shot the boy a dark look. “Mind your manners, Pinoc. Ellie can tell us as much as she wants.”

The manatee girl shook her head. “I don’t mind,” she said. “I didn’t turn into a human right away. For a while, I just swam up to the water and looked to see if he was there. Once he realized that fresh water attracted me, he kept on putting the hose next to the water

so I could find him. He would let me drink from the hose and talk to me. I even let him rub my tummy. It felt nice.”

Ellie paused for a moment. Her soft lips curved into a warm smile. “His name was Ryan, and he was really lonely. He would come every afternoon to put the hose in the water and wait for me to come. He told me how I was his only friend.

“I wanted to help him, so I asked my mama what I should do. But she just got really angry.” Ellie crossed her arms over her chest and deepened her voice, sounding like an irritated cow. *“Humans are not supposed to feed manatees! Don’t you know it’s dangerous for you to be there? What if you got hit by a boat? Never go back them again!”*

She sighed and unfolded her arms. “Since Mama wouldn’t help me, I knew I had to take matters into my own flippers — erm, hands. So, as soon as Mama had her back turned, I visited the Sea Sorceress and asked her to turn me into a girl.”

Ellie lifted up her wrist, showing a silver bracelet with a shell charm on it. “She told me that, if he loved me, that I’ll be able to switch from being a girl and a manatee whenever I wanted. If he didn’t, I would have to wander the world as a girl until I found my true love.”

“Sorceresses,” the quad amputee scoffed. “They’ll always rip you off.”

“Compared to some other curses, that’s pretty decent,” Gretel said in a quiet voice. The rest of the circle looked over at her. She flushed. “There wasn’t a stipulation, like you felt the pain of swords when you walked, or anything like that?”

“Nuh uh,” Ellie said, lowering her arm. “I think the Sea Sorceress really thought that I could do it. She was really nice. She even gave me a shell-phone if I had any questions.

“So she swam up with me to the surface and gave me the spell. She said that it’ll work when I taste the fresh water from the hose. I swam to Ryan’s house and he was there, waiting like usual.” She smiled “But he wasn’t exactly prepared for me.

“After I transformed, I popped out wearing nothing but the water. I tried telling him how much he meant to me, but I hadn’t learned English yet. I waved my hands around and tried to walk towards him. All I managed to do was fall on my face. Before Ryan could do anything, his mama came rushing out of the house and hit me on the head with a broom. I was so confused that I just hopped back into the water and swam away.

“I managed to find a safe place to come out and get some clothes. Some nice people found me. They taught me to walk and talk and they gave me this nice dress.” Ellie pinched the sides of the skirt and held it out.

“When I was ready, I went back to Ryan. He was next to the water, holding the hose and waiting for the old me. I walked up to him and I told him everything. Who I was, what I did, and that I...that I loved him.”

Ellie’s grin faded. “I thought he would be happy. I held out my arms and tried to give him a hug, but he pushed me away. I thought that he was gonna yell at me, but he just...looked at me.” Ellie’s bottom lip trembled. “He just looked so sad. Like I had taken the last thing he had away from him.” She shook her head. “Ryan ran into the house. He didn’t come out to the ocean after that. I came by his house the next day, but he wasn’t there. I found out later that he ran away from home. I tried looking for him, but I couldn’t find him.

“I thought that becoming human would make things better. I thought that he would be happy to be able to finally talk to me and that, maybe, he would grow to like me too.” She sighed. “But I didn’t even get a chance.”

The circle was quiet for a few long moments. Pinocchio sniffed and wiped his eyes. Fairy Godfather’s expression was downcast. Shimmer was the only one who looked Ellie in the eye.

“Is everything okay now?” Shimmer asked, breaking the silence.

Ellie nodded. “Yeah. I have a job and the nice people helped to get an apartment. It’s near a beach, so I’m not too far away from Mama. She likes to swim up when there’s no one around. I can’t understand her, but it’s nice that she still cares enough to visit.”

“I don’t think that’s what Shimmer means,” Fairy Godfather said. “Were you heartbroken when you realized that Ryan did not feel the same way about you?”

“Well, yeah,” Ellie admitted. “But I moved on.”

“But you turned into a human for this boy!” Gretel said. “And you can’t go back to the ocean! Isn’t that awful?”

“Not really,” Ellie answered, shaking her head. “Being a manatee was nice, but being human is really fun. I like trying new foods and meeting new people.”

“But he doesn’t love you!” Gretel protested. “Didn’t that ruin your life?”

Ellie shook her head again. “Not especially.”

“I think what Gretel is trying to express her confusion, though she is not doing it in a positive way.” Fairy Godfather shot a stern look at the young girl. “We’re just wondering why you’re fairly indifferent to the matter. This event seems to have altered your life quite considerably, yet you act as though it is nothing more than a mild inconvenience. Is this a coping mechanism?”

Ellie blinked. “I’m sorry?”

“Are you cutting yourself from pain of heartbreak because it hurts too much?”

“No!” she answered. “I’m not unhappy. Why are you acting like I should be?”

Fairy Godfather leaned forward. “I’m sorry, dear. It’s not that you should be upset about this. We’re just perplexed at your...unusual response.”

“Is being content really that unusual?” Ellie asked. She looked around the circle, hoping someone would give her an answer. The others just avoided her eyes.

When no one responded, Ellie gave an exasperated sigh. “Look,” she began. “I was bothered that Ryan didn’t give me a chance. But I can’t let that ruin my life. I gotta move on. There are plenty of other people out there; one of them has to like me.”

She looked around the circle again. “You all are stuck, aren’t you? You’re so focused on all of the bad things that happened in the past, you can’t look forward to the future.”

The circle was quiet for a moment. Then, in a meek voice, Gretel asked, “How are we supposed to move on?”

Ellie looked over at her neighbor. “You’re Gretel, right?”

The young girl gave a wide-eyed nod.

Ellie’s expression and voice softened. “You’re giving up candy for your brother, right? How come?”

Gretel looked down at her sneakers. “I was eating too much. It helped me feel happy again.”

Ellie leaned forward, as if this was an intimate and private conversation. “Was eating candy something that you liked doing with him?”

A long silence stretched out between them. Then, with tears welling in her eyes and a quivering bottom lip, Gretel nodded. “Uh huh.”

“Then why did you think eating candy was a bad thing?” Ellie asked.

“Cause that’s all I did,” Gretel mumbled. “When I wanted to feel happy, I just ate. Everyone was saying that it was bad for me.”

Ellie nodded. “Well, that is true. That’s how you get a figure like mine.” She patted her stomach fondly. “But do you really want to give up candy? You didn’t seem too happy about it earlier.”

Gretel didn’t say anything for a moment. She then shook her head again.

“Maybe you just need to change your association with candy,” Ellie suggested. “Instead of seeing it as a bad habit, maybe you can see it as a way to connect with your brother. When you eat candy, you can remember all of the good times you had with him.”

The young girl looked up at Ellie, her bottom lip trembling. Tears ran down her face.

Fairy Godfather stood up. Anger contorted the kind lines in his face, making him look much older. “What’s wrong with you? Why are you criticizing another member for her actions?”

Ellie stood up as well, sending her chair flying back. “I’m not!” she shouted back. “I’m just saying that there are other ways to react!”

Pivoting, she looked towards the other members of the group. “There are better ways to process your emotions. Beating yourself up makes you feel so much worse. It makes you think that you can’t heal.”

Ellie folded her hands and put them over her heart. “I’m not going to let my pain define my life. Just because Ryan wasn’t my true love doesn’t mean that I need to stop the world. It just means that I have to try harder to find the one who really cares for me.”

She was quiet for a moment. Her lips curled up into a small, sad smile. “I think that’s the problem with fairy tales. They just don’t teach you how to lose.”

With a sigh, Ellie went back to her seat. Bending down, she gathered her small purse and plate of lettuce and cookies. “I think I’ll be leaving now. I don’t need to be here.”

The manatee girl walked out the room, her flip-flops squeaking rebelliously across the tile floor. As she walked down the hallway, she heard the pitter-patter of tiny feet behind her. She turned. Gretel was running up to her. Ellie stopped and waited for the younger girl to catch up.

“Miss Ellie!” Gretel skidded to a halt. Shiny tear tracks were still visible on her small face. “I...um...” Her cheeks burned bright pink as she stumbled over her words. “Thanks for saying that. It really helped.”

The peasant girl then slipped a hand into her pocket and pulled out a piece of brightly wrapped butterscotch. “I was gonna throw it away after today, but I think you should have it.” She held it out.

Ellie’s face glowed with a big smile. “Thank you,” she said, accepting the candy.

“Is it okay if I walk home with you?” Gretel asked. “I don’t really feel like going back in there.”

“Sure, hon,” Ellie said, holding out her hand.

Gretel took the manatee girl’s hand, giving it a gentle squeeze.

The two new friends then walked out into the night, the humid air closing around them like an embrace.

River Water

Maura Lydon

The river spreads her talons, stretches out a narrow snout.
Music dances away from her gaze, a rocky melody of liquid alto;
violas and harps played by a keen-eyed spirit.
Dancing up the stream she goes, stone ruins wavering in her wake.
Like a hound, a bird, a dragon... form shifting through the ripples of her stream.
Away she flies, leaving laughter in the froth of her paws.
Would that I could see her for more than a moment,
that I could capture her heart in clumsy fingers and heavy strokes of ink or paint.
It has been done before.
The boundary between life and death, air and water, she lurks,
invisible as a fish beneath the soft surface of her creek.
Yet she hovers on the wall before me,
wrought in stillness that flows as only they can, those creatures of light and water.
In my words I let her slip through the gaps;
she escapes as she always has,
as she was always meant to.



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